

Mexican healthcare workers break off government talks and call national stoppage over union's head

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On the evening of October 8, workers of the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) walked out of talks at the Interior Ministry (Segob) after more than seven hours that produced nothing. They called a national stoppage on their own authority, without the approval of and against their own union. By nightfall they had pitched tents outside IMSS headquarters on Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City.

By the next morning, workers had shut outpatient care at clinics in Chihuahua and were blocking roads in Mexico City, the State of Mexico, San Luis Potosí and Querétaro. Over the two days, workers protested in at least 17 states and the capital.

The Segob table was meant to draw the rank-and-file revolt into official channels before the October 14 vote on the wage agreement negotiated by the National Union of Social Security Workers (SNTSS), which gives only 2.9 percent on the base wage, an increase below the rate of inflation.

However, it did the opposite. Seven hours on Bucareli Street showed the delegates that the ministry and the union bureaucracy were working together to impose that agreement, and the workers answered by taking the struggle into their own hands.

A table set to intimidate, not to negotiate

The talks opened shortly after 11:00 a.m. at the Palacio de Cobián, Segob's building on Bucareli. Tonatiuh Ramírez, head of the ministry's Government Unit, sat for Segob. The SNTSS sent Jesús Adrián Manjarrez Lafarga, its secretary of conflicts. Facing them were 37 delegates, one from each union section, and Eduardo Vinicio Hernández, representing the retirees. No report places Secretary General Rafael Olivos Hernández at the table.

An unnamed delegate described the talks to Salud FM in front of the building:

We went through the points we had brought, and we explicitly asked for a response to each and every one of them. Yet, at no point did they give a direct answer; the whole time, they just read out union history, bylaws, and various clauses... Finally, the 37 of us agreed to ask one last time: were they here to negotiate, or just to chat with us? The gist of their response was that they had come to hear our demands, not to negotiate.

According to the delegate and press reports, the delegates' phones were

taken from them on entering, while, she said, Segob "maintained constant access to cameras, cell phones, and means of communication with the outside world," arguing that since it controlled "the entire country," the 37 "could not halt the handling of other affairs." The delegates called it a violation of their freedom of expression, since they could not tell the workers waiting outside what was being said.

In the afternoon, delegates said, lawyers in the room threatened them with administrative sanctions. When they tried to leave, they were not allowed out of the building. One delegate got word outside that they were being intimidated and held. The crowd answered with chants of "This is a kidnapping!" and "We want the 37 plus one!" Movement leaders asked the National Human Rights Commission to intervene.

Afterward, Manjarrez complained that "there was no willingness to listen to us" and declared that "no one should presume to replace the will of the rank and file." The target was the 37: the bureaucracy that wrote the agreement invokes the rank and file to deny the protesting sections' delegates any authority and push through its own vote. The union, he added, "condemns the violent actions that may occur today or tomorrow."

The delegates gave a different account. Vinicio Hernández said in an interview that the 37 walked away from the table because the union itself told them, "We don't want to negotiate." He said: "Instead of acting as an arbiter, Gobernación tried to impose that this vote go ahead."

The delegates came out with no illusions that the "democratic" process was anything but a fixed agenda between the union and the government. Their hope of an extraordinary congress was shattered. Union leaders and officials, they said, refused to amend the agreement or the terms of the vote, and urged them to send the rank and file to the polls to ratify a 2.9 percent raise, far short of the 10 percent workers demanded.

Segob offered only to oversee the vote and ensure its "impartiality and legal validity," the unnamed delegate said. She asked:

How can you guarantee the validity of a process when, every single day, a knife is held to my throat and I'm told: "If you vote 'yes,' we keep working; if you vote 'no,' you go on strike"? All the workers are under threat; this is not a democratic consultation, it is a rigged one.

Through Segob, the delegates asked the SNTSS representatives for a written guarantee that no worker would be persecuted, harassed or repressed by the union. "At the end, they refused to give it to us," Vinicio Hernández said. The unnamed delegate left no doubt as to which side the union was on: "I hold the members of the congress who were present today, the general secretary, and our fellow union officials responsible for

our safety... I hold them accountable for anything that might happen to us.”

The table was meant to serve as a pressure valve. It burst the same day. “We are now going to take radical action; we are going to block the streets,” the delegate said. “Not a single step back.”

A stoppage called from below

After the delegates left the table at about 6 p.m., the rank and file called stoppages over the union’s head. “We are calling a national stoppage. We need the *compañeros* to take their facilities,” said América Barragán, a nurse from Section 3 in Jalisco.

Workers reported staggered stoppages in about 20 IMSS units that night. Active and retired workers had marched during the day in Aguascalientes, Campeche, Chiapas, Guerrero, Michoacán, Morelos, Tabasco, Quintana Roo and Yucatán. In Mexico City, workers from San Luis Potosí, Michoacán, Aguascalientes, Hidalgo, Querétaro and Tabasco had held Reforma at Insurgentes for more than eight hours, and at least 50 workers blockaded IMSS headquarters through the night.

In San Luis Potosí, a march blocked Highway 57, and workers then set up a sit-in in front of the offices of SNTSS Section 18. A nurse named Karina said workers buy glucometers, test strips, blood-pressure cuffs and thermometers with their own money. “The minimum wage went up 13 percent for all of Mexico, and ours 2.9 percent,” she said.

By Friday morning, the encampment had closed Reforma from Río de la Plata to the Diana Cazadora fountain, with tents pitched on the roadway. Workers blocked Bucareli, Avenida Chapultepec, Circuito Interior and other arteries, an IMSS unit in Tláhuac and the Calzada del Hueso outside Hospital General de Zona 32. In the State of Mexico, they blocked Hospital General Regional 200 in Tecámac, Clinic 72 on Avenida Gustavo Baz and the México–Pachuca highway, as well as the Periférico Norte. Protests were reported in Hidalgo, Baja California Sur, Puebla and Coahuila.

In Chihuahua city, workers closed avenues outside Hospital Morelos on Thursday night, and on Friday morning they stopped outpatient care, pharmacy and laboratory services at Hospital Morelos and several family medicine units. The stoppage showed who keeps the clinics running. In Ciudad Juárez, staff called a protest for Friday afternoon over the shortage of medicines.

In Querétaro, about 250 workers rallied in the state capital, and 130 in San Juan del Río. Action on this scale became possible only because workers organized it independently of, and in opposition to, both the government and the union.

The government and the union close ranks

President Claudia Sheinbaum did not mention the strikers at her press conference on October 9. Instead she announced a tour of IMSS-Bienestar hospitals “from now until December.” IMSS-Bienestar, the federal system into which her government has folded the health services of 24 states, is separate from the IMSS, where the stoppage is taking place. She said she would go “to see what the problem is, what is missing,” meeting hospital directors, regional coordinators and the system’s director, Alejandro Svarch.

On September 22, Sheinbaum told reporters that protests all over the country were “not true.” Now that the rank and file has made itself impossible to ignore, she will tour the wards with the managers who run

them, not with the workers whose demands her government has just rejected at Segob.

Segob denied that anyone had been held and urged the workers “not to affect the public with street blockades.” The ministry casts the workers who staff the deteriorating hospitals as a threat to the public that depends on them.

The SNTSS, for its part, postures in true Orwellian fashion. “Respect for the right to protest must be accompanied by respect for the health and life of patients,” its statement read. The union invokes the health and life of patients to condemn its own members, while keeping silent on the damage done to patients by the austerity the Morena government has imposed on public health. Every day, patients face medicine shortages, vacant posts and sutures and Gelfoam that run out in the operating room, while neonatal nurses bring their own supplies.

The government’s priorities are written into the 2027 budget Sheinbaum sent to Congress on September 8. She boasts of an 11.3 percent increase for health, yet total health spending would reach only 2.9 percent of GDP, less than half the 6 percent recommended by the Pan American Health Organization, and spending on education, science and culture 3.5 percent. Servicing the public debt would cost 1.575 trillion pesos, or 4 percent of GDP, more than the government plans to borrow all year. Spending on care programs falls 1.6 percent in real terms, while the Navy’s budget rises nearly 20 percent after inflation. On October 2, the International Monetary Fund urged a more ambitious and faster fiscal consolidation, that is, deeper cuts.

The union promised that “there will be no reprisals against any worker for expressing their disagreement.” Its communiqué said protest “does not, in itself, constitute a disciplinary offense.” The words “in itself” leave the door open. Article 136 Bis, added to the union statutes in September to punish workers who publicly denounce shortages, remains in force. In Querétaro, workers have already reported threats against staff who joined the stoppage.

The promise is a measure of the bureaucracy’s fear of the rank and file, and workers have reason not to trust it. In 2019, when tens of thousands of maquiladora workers in Matamoros struck in defiance of their union, the companies fired at least 4,000 of them, and the newly-installed government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador did nothing to protect them. Instead, Morena’s Senate leader, Ricardo Monreal, called on the local union and its backers to end the strike, and workers charged at the time that he had ordered the Tamaulipas state police to remove the pickets and reopen the factory gates.

“They left us alone”

Outside Segob, workers said the ministry “has always been on the side of the SNTSS” and that the talks were a “distraction.” The federal government and the union, they said, had “betrayed the rank and file.” Outside IMSS headquarters that night, workers said of the union leadership: “They are the ones who broke this pact with the worker. They left us alone.” Nurses on Reforma said part of the union had “turned its back” on them.

Workers reject the terms of the October 14 vote that Segob tried to impose. The union wrote the question, staffs the electoral committees in each section and will count the ballots, while the Federal Center for Conciliation and Labor Registration certifies the result. Miroslava Vargas, a nurse at the Carlos McGregor hospital in Mexico City, said: “They have to vote no, because what we want is a clear and transparent congress.”

Javier Vázquez, a representative of the movement on Reforma, told reporters it had arisen from the rank and file. That is where its strength

lies. The stoppage was called on the street, not by the union, and carried out by workers in their own units.

The unnamed delegate's report of the talks has drawn 42,600 likes and 10,000 shares. "It is crystal clear that the whole lot of them—the Secretary General, the IMSS Director, the Interior Secretary, etc.—are a MAFIA," wrote one commenter. Another wrote simply, "4T style," mocking the "Fourth Transformation" that López Obrador and Morena promised.

The way forward

In two days, the workers have shown that they, not the SNTSS, decide whether the clinics run. The stoppages now need an organization that answers to them. IMSS workers should elect rank-and-file committees in every hospital, clinic and department, independent of the SNTSS, of the health ministry workers' union (SNTSA) and of Morena and every other capitalist party, with delegates chosen in workplace assemblies and subject to recall.

Those committees would take the direction of the stoppages into the workers' own hands, linking the encampment on Reforma with the sit-in in San Luis Potosí, the clinics in Chihuahua and the IMSS-Bienestar workers whose hospitals the president is now touring. They should demand that the voter rolls and the count for October 14 be made public, and place their own observers at every polling place to prevent intimidation and coercion.

The government and the union apparatus have shown that their interests lie with the creditors and investors the budget serves, and with the suppression of workers' grievances that this requires. Rank-and-file committees can become the nucleus of a movement through which workers fight for political power, so that health care and the other critical industries of society are run to meet social need, not the profits of bankers and financiers.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) was founded to unite such struggles across borders. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges IMSS and IMSS-Bienestar workers who want to build these committees to contact us.



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