

Mexican health workers vote down wage deal as rebellion grows against the union and the government

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On Wednesday, rank-and-file workers of the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) voted down a wage agreement accepted by their union, the National Union of Social Security Workers (SNTSS). The vote rebuked both the union leadership that negotiated the deal and the government of President Claudia Sheinbaum that has defended it. It came one day after a national march that rank-and-file workers called through their own independent assembly, over the heads of the union, from which they urged their coworkers to vote No.

At about 2:30 a.m. on Thursday, SNTSS Secretary General Rafael Olivos Hernández released a video conceding defeat. “The results are clear: the majority of those who participated decided not to approve the wage proposal,” he said, giving no figures. Hours later, Sheinbaum said IMSS Director Zoé Robledo “has to open a working table to look for alternatives to give a better proposal,” but explicitly added that the new offer must stay within what is possible.

The rejected package added only 2.9 percent to the base wage, below the 3.45 percent annual inflation reported for September, and the union sold it as a 6.8 percent raise. Workers demand 10 percent paid directly into the base wage, upon which their pensions are calculated.

The No vote is an important step, but it settles nothing. It marks a new stage in the struggle. The leadership that wrote the deal, the director who signed off on it and the Labor Ministry that supervised the vote now propose to draft the next offer among themselves. The “possible” they invoke is set by a budget that gives more to the holders of the public debt than to healthcare. Moreover, the government has already shown, with police on the streets of the capital, how it means to enforce any agreement.

The national march of October 13 was not called by the union bureaucracy. It was voted on October 10 by a five-hour assembly held at the workers’ encampment outside IMSS headquarters in Mexico City, which also called on the independent unions to join. CNTE teachers, Metro workers, ISSSTE and Pemex workers, and students announced they would take part.

Mexico City’s government put the crowd at about 7,000; *El Universal* reported some 35,000. Contingents of nurses, doctors, retirees and cleaners came from more than ten states and added a new demand: health spending equivalent to at least 7 percent of GDP. “All the workers have to vote No,” Rafael Soto, a nurse at

the Siglo XXI National Medical Center and a spokesman for the movement, told the crowd. The march ended at the encampment of the parents of the 43 disappeared Ayotzinapa students and was repeated in at least 12 states, where the rank and file occupied nine union sections.

On October 14, about 474,000 active workers were called to vote at 670 polling sites, on a question written by the union. By 7 p.m., some 282,000, or 59.47 percent, had voted. The ballots were not numbered and some tables had no worker observers, while the Federal Center for Conciliation and Labor Registration (CFCRL) maintains that the process ran normally.

Within two hours, workers posted photographs of their units’ tally sheets. The La Raza Specialties Hospital in Mexico City voted 750 to 183 against the deal, and the General Zone Hospital known as Troncoso 1,260 to 64. In Ciudad Juárez alone, the preliminary count was 7,548 against and 325 in favor. By the movement’s count from nearly 100 hospitals and clinics, the No led by 28,400 to 4,350.

SNTSS General Secretary Olivos conceded five hours later, but neither the union nor the CFCRL had published a national count by Friday midday.

The government and the bureaucracy regroup

Olivos called the vote “an exercise of democratic and transparent participation that this leadership decided to convene,” and Labor Secretary Marath Bolaños hailed it as “a fundamental process for union democracy.” The vote was not the leadership’s gift. Since the 2019 labor reform, contract revisions must be ratified by the membership, and the leadership called the vote on nine days’ notice to ratify the deal before it took effect on October 16. Workers turned it against the leadership.

A worker at an IMSS hospital told the *World Socialist Web Site* on the day of the vote that at his workplace the union “practically says nothing.” Its representatives, he said, limit themselves to saying that the marches “have nothing to do with the union, and that it’s a personal matter whether we want to go or not.”

Olivos is not only the union’s secretary general but also a

registered alternate federal deputy for the ruling Morena party. At the signing of the union's 2024 wage agreement, IMSS Director Robledo praised him as "a great ally of the causes of Mexican unionism." Robledo of the IMSS, Olivos of the SNTSS and Sheinbaum of Morena are working hand in glove to stifle the movement of the rank and file.

The government has also answered the workers with police. On October 9, Mexico City police cleared simultaneous blockades by IMSS workers, pushing them back with riot shields on Viaducto, and state police cleared blockades in Pachuca, Hidalgo. Both governments are run by Morena. Mexico City's Public Security Secretariat first claimed it had followed its protest protocol; only after videos circulated did it open an internal investigation into three cases of improper use of force.

The limits of the "possible" are written into Sheinbaum's 2027 budget. It would bring total health spending to 2.9 percent of GDP, less than half the 6 percent recommended by the Pan American Health Organization, while debt service would take about 4 percent. What is "possible" is what remains after Wall Street's creditors are paid.

"It was not the union, it was the rank and file"

The movement answered Olivos within hours. In a statement, the Movimiento Nacional de Trabajadores demanded a raise of at least 10 percent, the removal of Olivos and his executive committee and an extraordinary national congress. It rejected any "patch" and called a second national march within 15 days. "The results show that the committee does not represent us," nurse Soto said. "We return to the negotiating table, but Rafael Olivos can no longer be there."

Many workers are drawing the conclusion that they need new leaders and a new union. "We need a real union that represents our needs," Soto said. The indignation behind this demand is justified. But replacing Olivos through an extraordinary congress, or forming a new "independent" union, would leave workers inside the legal machinery just used against them.

The 2019 labor reform, passed by Morena to meet the labor terms of the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement, created the CFCRL and its "consultations" to give contracts a democratic stamp while binding workers to the state. In Matamoros, the "independent" union formed after the 2019 maquiladora strikes became an instrument for suppressing the rebellion and its leader's vehicle into Congress for Morena.

Leon Trotsky wrote in 1940 that in Mexico the unions "have been transformed by law into semi-state institutions." He warned that in the epoch of imperialism the unions become instruments of capital "for the subordination and disciplining of workers," and that "democratic trade unions in the old sense of the term... can no longer exist."

Soto also called for a new leadership "free of political parties." The hostility toward Morena, the PRI and other established parties behind this is justified, but workers cannot keep their struggle

above politics. They are fighting a capitalist state, its budget and the party that controls their union. To declare the movement above politics leaves the field to Morena, which has already set the limits of the next offer.

The instinct to extend the movement to teachers, oil workers and Metro workers is correct. But its leadership cannot be handed to any union apparatus, "official" or "independent." In June, the CNTE ended a nearly three-week national strike against the 2007 ISSSTE pension law with the law still in force. FINTRAS, the self-styled independent alternative at IMSS-Bienestar, has confined itself to petitions and complaints to the federal prosecutor. Removing Olivos only changes the face at the negotiations.

That is why rank-and-file committees are crucial. IMSS workers should elect committees in every hospital, clinic and department, independent of the SNTSS, the SNTSA, Morena and every other capitalist party, with delegates chosen in workplace assemblies and subject to recall. Decisions on demands, dates and any return to talks must rest with those delegates. Such committees can reach teachers, oil workers and Metro workers directly, over the heads of their apparatuses, and link IMSS workers with health workers around the world through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The committees can begin now by taking inventory of the shortages, demanding the full count of the vote section by section and building their own strike fund. They can fight for 10 percent on the base wage, indexed to inflation; full staffing and supplies; the restoration of the defined-benefit pension for every worker; and health spending of at least 7 percent of GDP, paid for by halting the payments to creditors that Sheinbaum's "possible" protects.

These tasks point to the ultimate function of the committees. When they organize a strike, inspect the supplies, control the vote and publish the real figures, they begin to exercise functions that now belong not only to the union bureaucracy, but the state. As the struggle develops, they must become the organs through which workers open the books of the IMSS and the union, occupy the hospitals and run them under workers' control. That is the beginning of workers establishing their own power, in opposition to the state and the union, and the only avenue that can enforce what no negotiation within the "possible" will ever grant.

The committees require political leadership. The fight against Morena, its budget and the creditors it serves is a political fight. It requires a socialist program and the building of a revolutionary party of the working class, a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Mexico, in opposition to Morena and every other capitalist party.

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



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