

Mexican health workers gather in second general assembly: Which way forward?

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Rank-and-file workers of the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) met in Mexico City on Sunday, October 18 for their second general assembly, voting to unify every current of their movement into “a single national front of struggle.” The assembly ratified a national march for Wednesday, October 21, from the Siglo XXI National Medical Center, and called a third assembly for Sunday, October 25.

Workers are organizing the “megamarch” to demand a 10 percent raise paid directly into their base wage, the hiring of staff, medicines and supplies, and the removal of the union leadership. They will march along Paseo de la Reforma to the Zócalo, joined by CNTE teachers and Pemex retirees.

The assembly and the march are the latest stage of a five-week rebellion against the union and the government. IMSS workers stormed the headquarters of their union on October 1, struck and organized demonstrations over its head on October 8–10, occupied union sections in at least seven states and, on October 14, voted down the union’s wage deal by a huge margin. Their revolt is in turn part of a major escalation of the class struggle internationally, including the mass protests against social cuts, the cost of living and war in France, Spain, Italy and other countries.

The assembly met as the leadership of the National Union of Social Security Workers (SNTSS) and the government of President Claudia Sheinbaum work to keep the struggle out of the workers’ hands. Since the vote, SNTSS Secretary General Rafael Olivos and IMSS Director Zoé Robledo have held closed-door talks, and the union has asked the labor authorities to push back the deadline for a strike to November 15, “to continue negotiations, reach an agreement and prevent a strike from breaking out.”

At the assemblies, the question of a national strike has largely been avoided out of hopes that demonstrations and the No vote could pressure the bureaucracy into an extraordinary congress, attended by rank-and-file representatives, through which the movement could appeal to the government. However, continued intransigence from the bureaucracy and the government now signals that only decisive action will ensure that the movement heads toward victory.

Workers can impose their demands only through mass struggle, and that requires organizations of their own, independent of the union apparatus and all the political forces that defend it, and a conscious political leadership.

The second assembly

The second assembly was held outside the SNTSS in opposition to its bureaucracy. Its press release, signed “Resistencia IMSS,” declared that “all the movements, the 37+1 currents of thought, collectives and workers of IMSS” had entered “formal and articulated unity.” It also announced a “Mañanera de la Resistencia” to answer the president’s daily morning press briefing with reports from the hospitals.

Five executive action items were unanimously approved, and four of them pointed to the potential for the emergence of new forms of organization independent of the union apparatus and the government: the election of representatives in every unit, networks to defend workers against “harassment, repression, censorship, intimidation or administrative sanction,” the democratization of spokespersons, and the self-management of the struggle through contributions from the base “in kind or in time.”

The fifth executive action, however, pledges that the struggle will be pursued on a legal basis, adhering to “the legal roadmap and instrument” to support “every action and stance taken by the movement.”

The assembly’s “unrenounceable objectives” are the removal of Olivos and his committee, an Extraordinary National Congress, a wage review and the “transparent election of new genuine representatives.” According to Mery Barragán, a nurse from Section III in Jalisco and a leader of the 37+1, formed by one rank-and-file worker from each of the union’s 37 sections and one retiree, the unit representatives will form “the committee that will attend the Congress.”

The demand to remove Olivos and convene an extraordinary congress is a significant step forward, and the indignation behind it is entirely justified. But “new genuine representatives” would still face the same government led by President Sheinbaum, who has effectively rejected the workers’ demands on the basis of the budget, insisting that any new offer must stay “always within the limits of the possible.”

What workers need are not new faces at the head of the same apparatus, but new organizations of struggle, which cannot accept the limits, including the legal ones, that the state and the union apparatus place on their ability to organize and strike outside the officially recognized union structures.

The question of the national strike

On October 18, nurse Barragán published the assembly's agreements on Facebook with a "Clarification of doubts about the strike": "There is no intention on the part of the movement to carry out a strike." It told workers not to heed "the strike committees that the delegates of your units have mentioned."

On October 20, the 37+1 demanded that its members "form an active and representative part" of the negotiating table between the union and IMSS. The demand that representatives of the rank and file sit at that table is legitimate. What will decide the outcome is the force behind them: a deal forced on the government by mass action is a different thing from one reached by the bureaucracy "within the possible."

Many workers fear, with reason, that only the union can call a legally recognized strike, and that striking outside it could mean firings. Under the union's statutes, a strike requires a two-thirds majority, in the hands of the same apparatus whose congress approved the sellout by 1,056 to 260. The "legal roadmap" leads, as it is intended to, away from any strike. A congress that is genuinely the workers' own can only be won by the organized power of the rank and file.

In a radio interview, Barragán called it "a healthy and peaceful movement" that "is apolitical." This framing only serves to politically disarm the workers, who are fighting a state that will use the law, the police, already deployed on the capital's streets, and the gag rule of the union against them.

The president's claim that IMSS workers are being manipulated by the right-wing opposition parties is a cynical attempt to intimidate them from breaking politically with Morena: you are either with them or with us. Workers must reject the entire rotten bourgeois establishment while advancing their own independent politics.

To declare the movement apolitical, moreover, leaves the field to Sheinbaum's Morena party, which is setting the limits of what is "possible."

Those limits are set by Sheinbaum's 2027 budget. On October 15, the Chamber of Deputies' Social Security Commission, chaired by Arturo Olivares Cerda, the Morena deputy who led the SNTSS before Olivos and whose registered alternate is Olivos himself, approved the budget that holds health spending to 2.9 percent of GDP while debt service takes about 4 percent. It attached a mere recommendation of 1 billion pesos more for IMSS, about 0.06 percent of the 1.66 trillion pesos budgeted for social security.

The sentiment for decisive action is growing. "Why do we keep giving them more chances?" one worker asked in an IMSS workers' group. "We should already be on strike so that they feel the pressure, not us."

The way forward

The November 15 extension is a maneuver to buy time to demobilize the movement. But the rank and file have already struck on their own authority, and in Chihuahua workers kept emergency care running while they stopped outpatient services. The task is to prepare from below to generalize those stoppages into a national strike: electing rank-and-file committees in every hospital, clinic and department, with delegates subject to recall; building a strike fund and networks against reprisals; organizing emergency care; and winning the support of IMSS-Bienestar and ISSSTE workers (Institute for Social Security and Services for State Workers), teachers, oil workers and patients. The delegates the assembly has called for should be elected to these tasks and answer to the workers who elect them.

The demands are 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 payments to creditors. Workers can force concessions through mass struggle, but each demand collides with a budget and government beholden to the banks. In the fight for them, the committees must open the books of the IMSS and the union and, as the struggle develops, become the organs through which workers occupy the hospitals and run them under workers' control, the beginning of workers' own power.

The movement has correctly broken with the SNTSS bureaucracy, but this break must be carried through. Limiting it to a legal roadmap, no strike and a congress under the union's statutes, reflects illusions Morena cultivated with its promise of union democracy in the 2019 labor reform.

The rank and file must remain in control of the struggle by building democratic committees, which must then link IMSS workers with the teachers and oil workers marching beside them and with health workers internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Most fundamental is the question of political leadership. The rebellion requires political leadership: a socialist program and a revolutionary party of the working class, a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Mexico.

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



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