Mexico's government imposes rejected wage deal on health workers as union moves against protesters

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3 November 2026

On October 28, health care workers of the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) found the 8 percent wage package, they had rejected in the streets already on their pay stubs. A text message from the IMSS thanked them “for sustaining the IMSS every day.”

That same day, the Federal Center for Conciliation and Labor Registration (CFCRL) issued a resolution registering the agreement between the IMSS and the National Union of Social Security Workers (SNTSS). No worker voted on it.

Workers carried out their plans for a third national march on October 30, blocking the entrances of the Interior Ministry (Segob) in Mexico City, with protests in 11 cities across eight states. The Mexico City government put the turnout in the capital at 800; organizers had expected at least 10,000. A “constituent assembly” the next day called a fourth national march for November 9.

The rebellion continues, but it faces a major turning point. The vote of October 14, in which workers overwhelmingly rejected the first offer, has simply been overridden, not by SNTSS Secretary General Rafael Olivos alone, but by the labor machinery the government of President Claudia Sheinbaum and her party Morena have further integrated into the state through its 2019 labor reform in the name of “union democracy.”

The same state now deals with the movement’s most pliant representatives, while the union bureaucracy hunts down the most combative workers. The struggle cannot be won within this “legal” framework, whether by retaking the SNTSS through its statutes or by registering a new union under the same laws. It requires organizations independent of the union apparatus, the state and Morena.

Imposed on the pay stub

The deal splits the 8 percent into 4 percent on the base wage and 4 percent on a rent allowance known as Concepto 11. Only the base wage counts toward pensions. Against annual inflation of 3.45 percent in September, the base wage gains just over half a point.

In Puebla, members of SNTSS Section 1 announced on November 2 that they will sue the CFCRL before the federal labor court. Their legal adviser, Alejandro Conde Hernández, said: “The first proposal, of 6.8 percent, was put to a vote, but not the second, of 8 percent. That is where the Federal Labor Law began to be violated.”

On October 27, IMSS Director Zoé Robledo presented a 120-day plan that keeps the 8 percent and promises permanent posts for 10,939 temporary workers: four months of promises during which the movement is expected to dissolve.

On October 22, Sheinbaum washed her hands of the union: “It is up to the workers. It is not up to the authority… not up to the director of the IMSS, nor the President of the Republic.” Her labor registry, however, has certified a deal no worker voted for.

What the SNTSS represents

Workers who marched are being summoned before the union’s Honor and Justice Commission under Article 13 of the SNTSS statutes, which restricts opposition to the leadership. César Becerra, a nurse at the La Raza National Medical Center, confirmed five summonses on October 22; UnoTV counted seven. On October 29, three more workers were summoned in Mexicali and Tijuana, accused of being “antagonistic to the union.”

Zuiry Hernández, a medical assistant at General Hospital No. 8, described the penalty: “They take away the union representation we are entitled to.” The dues, however, continue to be deducted. Omar Valderrey, a nursing assistant, told the Tijuana weekly *ZETA*: “They are really hunting us, they are inside the units looking.”

The business magazine *El CEO* reported that dues withheld for the SNTSS rose with the first paycheck under 8 percent, since they are calculated on total pay. UnoTV estimates that the union collects about 1.271 billion pesos ($67.5 million) a year from some 476,000 workers. Every raise it signs increases that income automatically, including the half paid into an allowance that adds nothing to pensions. Olivos earns 962,240 pesos ($51,000) a year from his IMSS post. “Resigning is not in my plans,” he told *Proceso*.

The bureaucracy does not stand above the conflict as a neutral negotiator. It draws its income and its positions from the arrangement it enforces, and it polices the workforce on behalf of the IMSS and the government.

Segob chooses its interlocutors

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At the Interior Ministry (Segob) on October 30, three officials received eight representatives of the 37+1, a group of one rank-and-file worker from each of the union's 37 sections plus one retiree. They asked Segob to broker a meeting with the SNTSS executive and the Labor Secretariat, and left with no date, only the promise of a call.

América Barragán, a nurse from Jalisco who leads the 37+1, said they had given Segob "a vote of confidence." Addressing the marchers, she said the aim was "to clarify everything within our union and improve our union, not to eliminate it." If there is no answer within a week, she said, they will continue the blockades and perhaps take over the airports. On October 18, Barragán had declared that the movement had "no intention" of striking. She and Eduardo Vinicio Martínez, a retired IMSS worker, reject the "little groups" they say are aimed at a parallel union.

Those kept out of the meeting were Rafael Soto, a nurse at Siglo XXI, and Octavio Fernández, an anesthesiologist at the same center. Their wing formally constituted the Assembly of the IMSS Resistance on October 31, in the hall of Section 9 of the CNTE teachers' union. It ratified a seven-point program that includes a 10 percent raise, health spending of 7 percent of GDP, repeal of the statutes workers call the "gag law" and Olivos's removal through an extraordinary national congress. It agreed to build "horizontal" committees from the workplace up and declared "the political autonomy and nonpartisan character of the movement." Soto has said the mobilizations are not directed against the IMSS or the government and warned on October 21 that "a minute of national strike could cost lives."

There is a real political differentiation taking place, but neither wing of the rank-and-file movement has made a decisive political break with the bureaucracy and the capitalist state. Both are collecting signatures to meet the condition Olivos himself set for resigning: two-thirds of the membership, or 316,667 workers, "as the statute says." Soto said on October 30 that they had passed 100,000. The dispute is over who will negotiate with Segob.

In receiving the 37+1 and shutting out Soto and Fernández, Segob has shown which representatives it prefers: those who offer it their confidence, rule out a strike and promise to keep the conflict "within our union." Marchers have addressed their demand for Olivos's removal to Sheinbaum herself, noting that Olivos is a Morena alternate deputy whose protection the government could lift. Workers are being asked to wait for the ruling party to discard its own man.

New forms of organization, not a new registry

The split has brought into the open the question of whether to retake the SNTSS or form another union. *Animal Político* reported a disputed proposal for a congress of more than 150 delegates to form a "new union option." Soto has denied any plan to found a new union.

Morena's 2019 labor reform promised union democracy and the freedom to choose a union. The CFCRL it created has now registered a contract revision that no worker voted on. Whether workers retake the SNTSS through its statutes or register a new union, they will answer to the same registry, the same labor courts and the same Labor Secretariat. A new union recognized on these terms would face the same demand Sheinbaum made of the SNTSS on October 21: "The union has to cooperate." As Leon Trotsky wrote of Mexico as early as 1940, "the trade unions have been transformed by law into semi-state institutions."

Nor does the nonpartisan stance adopted on October 31 make the movement independent. A movement that asks Morena's Interior Ministry to arrange the removal of a Morena deputy remains, whatever its intentions, tied to Morena. Independence requires a conscious break with Morena, with the right-wing National Action Party (PAN), whose leader workers drove from their sit-in on October 21, and with every other party of the capitalist class.

What way forward?

The rank and file have shown a different instinct, holding the encampments at IMSS headquarters and at the union building since October 8 and 9. The committees the October 31 assembly agreed to build point in the right direction. To advance, they must be independent of the SNTSS and its statutes, of the CFCRL and of Morena. Elected in every hospital and clinic, with recallable delegates, such committees could organize the defense of every worker summoned before the Honor and Justice Commission, take inventory of the shortages and open the books of the IMSS and the union.

On this basis they could prepare what the movement's leaders have so far ruled out: a national strike organized from below, with emergency services kept running under workers' control, as in Chihuahua on October 9.

The movement's demands confront a government that has budgeted 2.9 percent of GDP for health in 2027 while setting aside 1.575 trillion pesos for debt service. A 10 percent raise on the base wage indexed to inflation, full staffing and the restoration of the Retirement and Pension Regime (RJP) for every worker can be won by halting payments to the creditors.

It requires linking IMSS workers with those of IMSS-Bienestar and the ISSSTE, with the CNTE teachers and with health workers internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Above all, it requires a socialist program and the building of 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 to contact us.

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