Mexico's President Sheinbaum throws governor a lifeline over Guadalajara water protests

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On the night of November 1, residents of eastern Guadalajara blocked the intersection of Javier Mina Avenue and Pedro Celestino Negrete Street, forcing the city's Day of the Dead Catrinas parade to change its route. The protesters, from San Felipe, Oblatos, La Ex Penal, Blanco y Cuéllar, La Loma and other working-class neighborhoods, said they had gone 32 days without water. "I'm sorry about the parade, but forgive us and understand us too, we have gone more than a month without a drop of water," Leticia Hernández told UnoTV. They vowed to keep blocking streets until supply is restored.

In nearby El Retiro, tap water that had run brown and smelled of sewage for days turned bright turquoise. The water utility, the Intermunicipal Water and Sewerage System (SIAPA), has offered no explanation. It keeps 627 neighborhoods under *tandeos*, rotating supply cuts, and Governor Pablo Lemus of the right-wing Movimiento Ciudadano (MC) admits that about one-third of a metropolitan area of more than five million people faces interruptions.

These protests follow a month of mass mobilizations that the Jalisco government met with tear gas, water cannon, beatings and jailings. President Claudia Sheinbaum and her "left" nationalist Morena party first denounced the repression and called on Lemus to resign. Then, on October 28, they brought him to the president's morning press conference in the National Palace to announce a 25-billion-peso (about $1.35 billion) plan whose main works begin in 2027 and are due to finish at the end of 2028.

The federal government acted to contain the political crisis, not to end the water crisis. Faced with a movement that threatened to merge with the strikes and protests spreading across Mexico, Morena closed ranks with the MC governor.

Its plan offers promises for 2028 and leaves untouched the leaking pipes, the poisoning of the city's sources by industry and agribusiness, and the system that treats water as a commodity. The breakdown in Guadalajara is one expression of a national and global water crisis that capitalism has produced and cannot solve.

On August 23, twenty groups led by the Mexican Institute for Community Development (IMDEC) marched for clean water and accountability from the corporations that pollute and hoard it: developers, bottlers, breweries, industrial corridors and agribusiness. In August alone, complaints against SIAPA made up 51 percent of all complaints filed with Jalisco's human rights commission.

On October 11, about 10,000 people marched to Casa Jalisco, the governor's residence, carrying bottles of brown water from their taps. Police dispersed them with tear gas and water cannon. Thirty-nine people were arrested, some sent to a maximum-security prison, and lawyers denounced torture inside Casa Jalisco. "The police split my head open," said detainee Teodoro Jesús Torres Valdez.

Lemus first blamed 400 infiltrated "shock groups." The next day, with videos of the beatings circulating nationally, he admitted "excessive use of force." Out of 230 police officers deployed, 17 face an administrative procedure.

Security Secretary Juan Pablo Hernández has kept his post and now has police delivering water by truck to rationed neighborhoods.

Protests continued on October 18, giving rise to neighborhood blockades in Guadalajara and Tonalá. At the same time, Workers of the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) have been blockading hospitals across the country, including Jalisco, and truckers carried out a national stoppage. On October 19, defending fuel subsidies, Sheinbaum warned: "Look at what is happening in various countries of the world," referring to the mass protests in France. Behind their partisan quarrels, Morena and MC share one concern: to keep these struggles from coming together and targeting the whole rotten system they both defend.

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How the water is poisoned

To judge the October 28 plan, workers need to know how water reaches their homes. Between half and two-thirds of Guadalajara's water comes from Lake Chapala, which receives the Lerma River after it crosses the industrial heartland of central Mexico, along with agricultural runoff loaded with agrochemicals. Part of that water travels to the city through an open canal built in the 1950s, where it receives household and industrial sewage and garbage. The authorities now admit to 150 illegal discharges into the canal.

The water then reaches the 70-year-old Treatment Plant No. 1 in Miravalle, which supplies roughly 42 percent of the population. The head of the National Water Commission (Conagua), Efraín Morales López, admitted the plant is too old to treat water carrying that load of contaminants. What it cannot remove flows into homes. From there, water enters some 8,000 kilometers of decaying pipes that lose 40 to 50 percent of it to leaks.

An IMDEC registry of 1,477 reports from 520 neighborhoods found that 84 percent received foul-smelling or turbid water, often for more than a year, and two-thirds of those affected reported skin conditions. Around Chapala, in Poncitlán, thousands of children suffer kidney damage, and Jalisco has some of the highest rates of chronic kidney disease in the world. Of 784 formal complaints tracked by IMDEC, SIAPA resolved six.

Workers are paying for the crisis. María Morales, who took part in the November 1 protest, told UnoTV that her household spent 5,000 to 6,000 pesos ($270–325) on bottled water and private trucks in six weeks, about 40 percent of what a minimum-wage worker earns in that time, while still paying SIAPA bills.

The Sheinbaum-Lemus plan consists of two federal aqueducts. The first, 42 kilometers long, will carry up to 8,000 liters per second in a closed pipe from near Chapala to the Cerro del Cuatro tank, bypassing part of the open canal. The second will raise the flow from the El Zapotillo and Calderón dams from 2,300 to 3,500 liters per second. The state will rebuild Miravalle over two years and close the illegal discharges.

None of this answers the emergency. The aqueducts will not deliver a liter before 2028. There is no program to replace the distribution network, so every new liter will enter pipes that lose nearly half of it. The industries along the Lerma and Santiago rivers, which have poisoned Chapala for decades, are not mentioned, nor are the bottlers, breweries and developers named by the protesters.

Sheinbaum's rejection of privatization is presented as the great difference with Lemus, whose own 42-billion-peso plan in June proposed public-private partnerships. But the announcement itself exposed the record of the entire political establishment. Lemus revealed that the state had just retaken Treatment Plant No. 4 in Toluquilla, handed to a private operator in 2012. It was contracted to deliver 1,000 liters per second and delivered one-tenth of that. For 14 years, governments of the National Action Party (PAN), the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and MC did nothing.

Morena's own record shows where its priorities lie. In the summer of 2022, taps in Monterrey ran dry for weeks while breweries and bottlers kept pumping. In February 2023, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said he would not allow Tesla to build a gigafactory in Nuevo León: "If there is no water, no." After two video calls with Elon Musk, he reversed himself. Musk shelved the plant in 2024, and it was never built. Water scarcity was something to negotiate with a billionaire, not a limit on corporate demands.

In Mexico City, groundwater extraction is sinking the historic center by as much as 40 centimeters a year. In all three World Cup host cities, a university study found, public money went to tourist infrastructure while water conflicts went unresolved.

Mexico's water is distributed through concessions under the National Water Law imposed in 1992 by Carlos Salinas de Gortari, which turned it into an asset for agribusiness, mining, beverage and industrial corporations. Morena's December 2025 water law banned the private resale of concessions but kept the system in place.

Internationally, a United Nations University report this year found that much of the world has entered "water bankruptcy," with 2.2 billion people lacking safe drinking water and 70 percent of aquifers in long-term decline. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained, the report's proposals to reallocate water rights and protect the poor are "utopian under current conditions," because they collide with capitalist private property and the nation-state system.

Guaranteeing water requires an emergency program to replace the networks and clean up Chapala and the Santiago River, the expropriation of the corporations that poison and hoard water, and the placing of the entire system under the democratic control of working people. That is a socialist and internationalist program, and it requires building revolutionary leadership in the working class.

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