

Mexican Teachers' Massive, Militant Strikes and Demonstrations Face an Intransigent Government

September 9, 2013

Teachers, whose unprecedented strikes and massive, militant protests by tens of thousands have shaken Mexico over the past week, may be headed for what could be a violent confrontation with the government. As the teachers' strikes and demonstrations led by the National Coordinating Committee (la CNTE), a rank-and-file caucus within the Mexican Teachers Union (el SNTE), have become more extensive and militant, so too has the government of President Enrique Peña Nieto become more intransigent. Mexican history could be about to repeat itself, and it is a history replete with use of the police and the army to crush militant labor unions, peasant organizations, student protestors and other movements for democracy. Should Enrique Peña Nieto decide to use force to put down the teachers' movement, it would come at great political cost, removing the veneer of democracy from what he has called the "new" Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Yet, given the country's history, and his own personal record, violent repression of the teachers is not unthinkable.

Mexico's independent and democratic teachers' movement has a forty-year history of massive demonstrations and sit-ins by tens of thousands, especially by the teachers of Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Mexico City, and more recently those in Michoacán. But we have never seen anything as militant as these current demonstrations nor as extensive, with teachers striking and protesting in virtually all of the country's 31 states as well as in the Federal District. Teachers have occupied public buildings, blocked the Mexico City international airport for several hours, seized highway toll booths, and for several days 30,000 have sat-in at the Mexico City's Plaza of the Constitution. They have also threatened to take over banks and businesses. All of these are the traditional tactics of the militant teachers, but never unleashed on such a scale and never finding such a response on a national scale.

The protests have been driven by the Mexican Congress's passage of an education reform law which, even though weakened, subjects teachers to evaluations. At the same time issues of wages, benefits and conditions are also involved in each state. The teachers' protests, however, are not solely motivated by their concerns about their jobs and salaries. La CNTE also opposes to the government's plan to open the Mexican Petroleum Company (PEMEX) to private investment and to pass new tax laws expected to benefit the rich and harm working people and the poor. As one longtime labor activist told me, the teachers' strikes have been accompanied by an unparalleled radicalization of the population throughout the country. The left-led CNTE thus finds itself at the head of an inchoate national movement opposed to Peña Nieto's political agenda. Leading the teachers' movement has been Local 22, the Oaxaca Teachers Union, the historic leader of the teachers' movement, which has mobilized tens of thousands of its striking members, 30,000 of whom currently occupy the *zocálo* or Plaza of the Constitution in Mexico City filled with their tents, lean-tos, and huts.

La CNTE has now called for a "national civic work stoppage," something like a general strike, for Wednesday, September 11. The teachers have won the support of 60 other labor unions, peasant organizations, and community groups that support them and might join them in such a shutdown. While such national civic work stoppages called in the past have had only very limited success—Mexico unlike almost all other Latin American nations has never had a general strike—it does represent an attempt to expand the movement and amplify its impact. The call for a national work stoppage also contributes to the growing sense of confrontation between the teachers and the

government.

The Government Intransigent

Peña Nieto and his Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) have issued statements making it clear that they are preparing to confront the teachers and deal with them. Peña Nieto has said that he will negotiate with the teachers, but that “There is no turning back, the education reform law will take effect.” Education Minister Emilio Chuayffet told the teachers that the government has only one interlocutor, and that is the Mexican Teachers Union, not its dissident opposition caucus la CNTE which, he said, represents only ten percent of all teachers. Most ominously, Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, the Minister of the Interior who is in charge of the country’s internal security, told the press that tolerance has its limit and that if the teachers’ mobilizations affect the country’s citizens, the law will be invoked.

At the same time, the Mexican press has begun to change its tone. An article in *El Universal* refers to “Mexican Teachers Provoking Chaos in Five States” while conservative political columnists suggest that la CNTE is linked to left-wing guerrilla groups and warn that it is taking the country to “A National APPO,” a reference to the teachers’ strike that became a civic uprising in the city of Oaxaca in 2006, with massive repression and death squads killing several teacher leaders. In late August thousands of teachers blocked TV Azteca and Televisa because, they said, those stations’ television reports were “lying” about the teachers’ protests and their demands. Still TV press reports take the side of the government and portray the teachers as unreasonable and violent. Some commentators on the left have begun to warn of the dangers of government’s coming violent repression of the movement.

Up until now, Peña Nieto has been on an incredible role. He won election (some say a fraudulent election) and his party, the PRI, won a majority in both the Senate and the House. Even before he took office he created the Pact for Mexico, uniting all of the major parties around his political agenda of modernization. After his election (but before he took office) the Mexican Congress passed a labor law reform that he supported, and after he took office it passed his education reform. He also jailed the controversial, corrupt, and unpopular labor and political leader Elba Esther Gordillo, the head of the Mexican Teachers Union (el SNTE), on charges of embezzlement. Peña Nieto and the PRI with the support of the conservative National Action Party (PAN) and very likely some members of the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), now stand poised to pass its energy reform bill permitting private investment in petroleum. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, former presidential candidate and leader of the Movement of National Regeneration (MORENA), has been leading the movement against the privatization of petroleum, holding protest rallies of as many as 50,000 in Mexico City, many of those striking teachers. The teachers, who not only opposed the most recent education reform law but also generally oppose any role for the private sector in petroleum, stand squarely in the path of Peña Nieto’s parade—and he will not have them raining on it.

The confrontation between the Peña Nieto government and la CNTE and the teachers could come on September 15, a date by which the government would like the *zócalo* cleared in preparation for Mexican Independence Day Celebrations on September 16. On that day the Mexican President stands on the balcony of the National Palace and gives the “shout of Hidalgo,” leader of the Mexican independence revolution in 1810: “Long Live Mexico!” Similarly in towns and cities throughout the country, governors and mayors give the shout from state capitols and city halls. The powers-that-be hope to sweep the movement away by that date, though they would have to clear the teachers out of the squares they now fill and the buildings they now occupy. A confrontation could come earlier if one side or the other takes more aggressive action.

What Can Be Expected?

Historically, whenever the Mexican government has felt threatened by a mass movement which might become a challenge to its political power, it has mobilized the police and the army to crush the movement. The 1959 railroad workers strike, perceived to by the government to be a Communist-led assault on the government, was suppressed by the Mexican Army, with thousands fired, the leaders jailed for years, and some killed and many injured in the repression of the movement. When students protested to demand democracy in 1968, taking advantage of the fact that Olympics were being held in Mexico, the government attacked their demonstration, killing hundreds. A similar suppression of the student movement took place in 1971. The Mexican Electrical Workers (STERM) and their Democratic Tendency (TD) attempted to carry out a general strike in 1976 that was also suppressed by the army with firings, arrests, and the break-up of the movement. More recently, on October 10, 2011, the Mexican government of President Felipe Calderón sent police and army to seize the Light and Power Company facilities, dissolving the company, and firing 44,000 workers, eliminating the independent and oppositional union from the workplace. Calderón's government also brought false charges against Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, head of the Miners and Metal Workers Union, forcing him to seek asylum in Canada.

President Peña Nieto himself is known for having a heavy hand. As governor of the State of Mexico he was principally responsible for the police repression of a community movement in the town of Atenco in May of 2006. The Mexican Human Rights called the incident a "tragedy." Over 200 people (ten of them children), said the commission, suffered cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, some 145 were arbitrarily arrested, 26 women were sexually assaulted, and give foreigners subject to such treatment were also illegally expelled from the country. As one activist said, "With him as president, anything is possible."

The Mexican teachers of la CNTE are well aware of this history. For years the Mexican Teachers Union was headed by Carlos Jongitud Barrios, leader of the Revolutionary Vanguard caucus associated with the PRI. Under his leadership of the union, dissident teachers in areas like Oaxaca and Chiapas faced not only firings and beatings, but sometimes assassination. The activists in those states, then as now, were principally indigenous, bilingual teachers, mostly women organizers at the base with elected leaders and spokesmen were usually men. The teachers fought for forty years to win the right to control their unions and to decide their own fate. Today the fight is against the education reform law, but also over the broader political agenda of Peña Nieto, and neither side seems prepared to back down.

Yet Peña Nieto would pay a very high political price, giving up his claim to represent a new and more democratic direction for Mexico. And any such massive national repression would have to have the approval of President Barack Obama and his administration, now preoccupied with its plans for a strike on Syria. What will happen in Mexico in the coming days? As one Mexican activist wrote to me, "The coin is in the air..."

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