

MEXICAN TEACHERS WIN MORAL VICTORY—STRUGGLE CONTINUES

September 25, 2013

Since school began again on August 19, tens of thousands of teachers have been engaged in strikes and demonstrations throughout Mexico—including seizing public buildings, highway toll booths, and border crossing stations, occupying public buildings and city plazas, and blocking foreign embassies—actions taken against the Education Reform Law and the new Professional Teaching Law and over local demands linked to wages and working conditions. While these are traditional tactics, these are the largest and most militant teachers' union demonstrations in Mexican history.

The National Coordinating Committee (la CNTE), an opposition caucus within the Mexican Teacher Union (el SNTE), leading about 200,000 of the nation's 1.2 million teachers, appears to have won a moral victory, even if it has not yet succeeded in its goal of overturning the new laws. As commentators have suggested, the dissident teachers of la CNTE have largely been successful in discrediting and delegitimizing the unilaterally imposed education reforms as well as in moderating their impact through small concessions granted by the government. Yet at the same time, it is not clear where the teachers' strikes are going. It is not clear how long these strikes and protests can continue without exhausting the teachers and their parent and student supporters if there is not some intermediate goal short of overturning the new education laws.

The Largest Teacher Protests in Mexican History

Driven by opposition to the education reforms based on teacher evaluations linked to student performance on tests, the traditional annual protests of tens of thousands of teachers from Oaxaca, Chiapas, and the Federal District (Mexico City)—that have taken place for the last forty years at the beginning of every school year—grew this year to include large numbers of teachers from the states of Michoacán and Veracruz as well as from about 20 other of the country's 31 entities. Throughout the country teachers received support from some students and parents, from university employees, and from a few independent labor unions.

For a few hours on September 13, it seemed as if the Oaxaca teachers' occupation of the *zócalo*, the national Plaza of the Constitution in the center of Mexico City, might lead to violent repression of the movement. But violence was averted when teachers voluntarily abandoned the *zócalo* for the Mexican Independence Day celebrations. Still, the teachers' demonstrations continue in Mexico City, choosing new targets—public spaces, private corporations, foreign governments—every day.

Yet, while the teachers have won a moral victory, the entrenched political system they have been fighting for four decades, as well as the recent reforms that threaten their employment security, continue in place. President Enrique Peña Nieto's Education Reform and the Professional Teaching Law remain in place, the president's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) continues to have a plurality in both houses of Congress (a majority with its small satellite parties); the president, of course, controls the federal Secretary of Public Education; and the Mexican Teachers Union (el SNTE) remains loyal to the PRI-government. While the protest demonstrations by approximately one-sixth of the teachers have been spectacular, they have not succeeded in having the national political impact that the teachers desire.

As the teachers have been engaged in these impressive nationwide strikes and protest demonstrations, no other section of the labor movement has gone into motion either over its own

issues or in sympathy and solidarity with the teachers. Controlled by the *churros*, the labor bureaucracy loyal to the PRI and to the government, both public sector and private sector workers have quietly gone about their work. Surprisingly, not even a single section of the public sector workers has rallied to the teachers' union's call for opposition to Peña Nieto and the PRI.

The teachers remain engaged in an impressive and at times spectacular struggle, but it is one taking place in relative isolation from the rest of the labor movement which remains inert. While the dissidents remain a minority within the teachers union—even if an impressively large minority—and while the rest of the labor movement remains quiescent, there appears to be little chance of the teachers' forcing the government to backtrack on its education policy.