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## *The Unexpected Crop* *Social Insurgency and New Alternatives for Education in* *México*

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### **Abstract**

During 2013, México was inundated by massive protests organized by hundreds of thousands of the close to two million teachers that form the mostly public, national school system. Twenty-six of the thirty-two states of the Republic witnessed some form of protest. For months schools were closed by teachers in several states, the border to the United States was barricaded a couple of days, main national highways were closed for many hours on several occasions and in Mexico City tens of thousands of teachers came from all corners of the country surrounded the National Palace, the Supreme Court building, the presidential house, the Stock Market, and the City Airport. Teachers created a tent city that for months occupied the main central square of the capital. In this article explains why these protests erupted, the dynamics and the strategic moves of the teachers' movement, and the current balance.



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During 2013, México was inundated by massive protests organized by hundreds of thousands of the close to two million teachers that form the mostly public, national school system. Twenty-six of the thirty-two states of the Republic witnessed some form of protest. For months schools were closed by teachers in several states, the border to the United States was barricaded a couple of days, main national highways were closed for many hours on several occasions and in México City tens of thousands of teachers came from all corners of the country surrounded the National Palace, the Supreme Court building, the presidential house, the Stock Market, and the City Airport. Teachers created a tent city that for months occupied the main central square of the capital. In this article I will try to explain why these protests erupted, the dynamics and the strategic moves of the teachers' movement and the current balance.

### **The National and Historical Context**

The present government-provided Mexican Educational System was created in 1921, as a direct result of an armed and bloody revolution (1910-1917) that overthrew a government of landlords, aristocracy and foreign investors. The revolution forced the creation of a national balance of social forces in which poor peasants gained land (national land reform), salaried workers were granted advanced labor rights, and all children were to have access to free public state schools.

A national system, funded and administered by the central state, was created to resolve the vast inequities created by a myriad of small local and very limited systems. The national state established normal schools to educate the children of peasants and workers to be teachers. In this manner, a socially progressive ideology was nurtured and these teachers became envoys of a national state, with the aim of establishing a cohesive bond with large masses that had many reasons for unrest.

Later, in 1943, the many regional unions were unified into one single organism that today has close to 2 million members and bargains labor conditions and salaries for the vast majority of teachers of the country. The creation of a national union, Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE), however, put in the hands of the central national state a powerful instrument of control, not only to stop social unrest, but also to control the teachers of the country. A large and very powerful political, social and electoral force was created and for many decades the central State had a tight corporative control over the Union.

In 1979, however, after a series of previous small movements, a stable opposition force was created within the union, Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (the "Coordination" or CNTE). Since then the CNTE has questioned the control imposed by the State over the union and the corrupt official leadership of the Union that helps maintain this control. Given the difficult conditions, it was quite an achievement that the new Coordination could control some five of the 52 sections that comprise the National Union.

### **A History of Neoliberal Assaults**

#### *The Assault on Salaries*

For many years Mexican teachers have been used to finance the expansion of the educational system. Behind the explosive growth of the number of students (which went from less than a million to 20 million in 60 years, is the fact that for almost 40 years, starting in the

1940s, teachers were paid less than what they were making in 1921, when the national system was created. This meant that for many years, the central government could hire two teachers at the cost of one. It was only in 1980 that the real wages of teachers came back to the level of 1921.

The comeback, however, lasted only a couple of years. In 1982, the real value of salaries suffered once again a reduction of 50 percent. However, this time the unpaid salaries did not go to finance the expansion of the system, but to pay the national external debt that had gone up astronomically. Up to 70 cents of each Mexican peso of the national budget went to foreign banks.

As a response in the eighties, the opposing teachers joined forces with the newly created faculty unions of universities, and organized a series of strikes during the following years. In 1987, this unrest helped a popular candidate for president who opposed neoliberalism. However because of a clear electoral fraud, he did not win the presidency. However, this did lead to the creation of a new party, the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), which became the third national political force.

#### *An Attempt to Decentralize Responsibility*

In the 1990s, a second assault took place in the form of an attempt by the national government to decentralize education to the states. This had two objectives: (a) to allow for the participation of private interests at the local level and, especially; (b) to cripple the national union.

In order to do that, the central government maintained its role, but tried to slowly pass on to the local governments the responsibility of the annual bargaining process. The teachers, however, every year created a movement that forced the central government to maintain the national negotiation and, at the same time, used local bargaining to obtain additional gains.

This double game empowered the teacher movements both at the national and local level. Twenty years later, in 2013, the central government finally gave up and decided to again centralize the education system. Teachers, nevertheless, continue to successfully press for local negotiations.

#### *The Alliance for Quality Education (ACE)*

A third neoliberal assault on Mexican teachers began in 2008, with a government initiative to introduce a series of changes in education under the name of Alliance for Quality Education (ACE). ACE was developed in association with some of the national biggest economic interests. Among other things, the initiative aimed at establishing evaluation of teachers, changing the rules on how to be hired as a teacher and increasing the participation of businessmen in local schools.

Strengthened by years of collective actions at the local level, teachers reacted promptly and massively. Union sections that were in the hands of a corrupt leadership that is subordinated to the central government revolted and took over the buildings of the local union sections, overthrew the old bosses and selected new democratic leaders. The strength of the teachers' movement increased substantially with tens of thousands of newly converted teachers. The

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Alliance succeeded in some points, such as changing the rules for the hiring of teachers, but also helped to create a wider base of organized opposition.

##### *"Universal Evaluation" of Teachers*

In 2012 the center-right National Action Party (PAN) proposed legislation to establish a periodical "universal evaluation" of each one of the almost two million teachers. Eventually, many teachers could be fired.

The strengthened teachers' movement, however, responded quickly—it surrounded the National Congress buildings, and pressured for negotiations. Disagreement among legislators on how to carry out education reform aided the teachers' movement. Lacking a previous and detailed agreement, they were faced with arguments to which they did not have coherent and consistent answers. They lacked a comprehensive vision of exactly what reforms they wanted. That led to contradictions and sometimes an open and angry debate right there in front of the teachers' negotiation team. These circumstances forced the politicians to retreat and the legal initiative was cancelled, at least temporarily.

##### *Constitutional and Legal Changes*

By the end of 2012 a new president had been elected. Behind curtains and months before, he had convinced the three main parties—including the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), to agree on a national agenda of constitutional and legal changes that resulted in an overhaul of labor conditions for teachers. Teachers were excluded from the national labor relations framework established by the constitution (which does not allow for considering a cause for dismissal of a teacher, the result of an evaluation, nor for the establishment of sanctions in the hands of educational authorities).

The president was to defuse the strengthening of the teachers' movement, and to subordinate teachers to a condition of vulnerability unlike any other sector of workers. The government carried on and approved what was called the Educational Reform, which involved nothing less than changing the constitution in order to consolidate changes of the national norms.

The result was a monumental rebellion that included many more sections of the national union and protest actions not seen before in a century of labor movements, as described at the beginning of this piece. After the constitutional change, and in the middle of the protests, came the approval of what was called the secondary laws, which specify details of the constitutional change.

In spite of its strength, the movement was not able to stop the legal changes (with the exception of a few cosmetic alterations), but achieved other important political gains. For example, it is clear that the teachers' movement is no longer an isolated small group of union sections, but a national current involving hundreds of thousands of teachers and tens of sections.

The political strategy designed by the national assembly of teachers and some other popular organizations, led to a clear moral and political victory for the movement. A group of academics travelled to every corner of the country and gave teachers an advanced and well-founded critical view of the reform.

The reform was an authoritarian process imposed by the president in complicity with the leadership of three political parties, with no room for discussion. It took Congress less than ten

days to modify the constitution, a process that normally takes months of debates, and many of the legislators did not even have a chance to read the proposed changes, but voted in favor anyway.

The so-called “reform” of education was never founded on even a minimal diagnosis of the situation of education nor on a clear argument on how these types of changes will contribute to the betterment of schools. In fact it was proven that more than an education reform, it was an attack on labor rights. The main thrust was to alter the labor conditions of teachers and subordinate them. Furthermore, it created a state of exception—only for teachers of public schools. In fact, in private schools would be evaluated, but could not be fired. It also created a climate of rigid control and supervision in the classrooms and schools as teachers were going to be videotaped to register if and how they complied with standards of teaching conduct.

Finally, public documents show that the basic blueprint of the reforms had been drawn months before it was proposed to the Congress. It had been developed by a research center supported by the most powerful firms of the country, including Coca Cola, beer companies, the main television chain, etc. It was a big business reform of education.

The victory on the battle of the arguments had a strong impact on the media. Although many of the newscasts, newspapers and other media severely criticized teachers, calling them “vandals,” “lazy,” social media and other very respected and independent media criticized the government and legislators because they had not given teachers and civil organizations a chance to engage in a real dialogue on the reform. It was a fast track reform.

In addition, teachers argued that the reform would contribute to the privatization of schools. At first it was not clear how this would happen. Then the government helped to prove the point when, based on a few phrases of the reform text that spoke of promoting the autonomy of schools, middle level officials started to notify schools that as a result of the reform now schools would have to begin paying electricity, water and telephone bills, as a way of becoming independent. These charges were astronomically high for many poor parents, which already were helping to provide schools with blackboards, bathrooms, running water and the like. Infuriated, parents started to occupy schools and close them down, sometimes in spite of teachers who would not dare to paralyze the schools as part of their protest.

Most importantly, the whole movement and its arguments had a clear impact on the legitimacy of the reform. A year later, it has yet to produce any change and betterment of educational processes and schools. It is met with skepticism and lethargy by local governments so much that the central government is now suing in the Supreme Court some states that have not adequately changed the local laws to conform to the national legislation. Teachers confront local governments every time they try to impose the law.

A law that has no support from those in charge of complying is an almost dead law. This is especially so in the field of education. Getting a law to be accepted is even more difficult in the case that requires the agreement of almost two million of persons who devote their life to knowledge. It is harder to convince teachers of the value of something that mistreats them, and the impact of what the teachers think is very powerful in their communities. Two million teachers are unconvinced and hundreds of thousands openly oppose it, with good reasons, a very powerful force.

## **The Unexpected Crop—More Critical and Activist Teachers**

The most interesting part of this process of assault and resistance is the important change that has been happening in the vision of teachers. In 1979, when the Coordination (CNTE) started, the motto was “salary and democracy,” the latter referring to the need to get rid of the oppressive union leadership. But by 2008 it was clear that the focus has undergone an important change. Yes, it still was salary and democracy, but it also included the defense of the right of teachers to begin changing education through their efforts.

Teachers moved into the discussion and practice of new alternatives for education. First in 2008, with the Alliance for Quality Education, the revolting teachers not only took the union buildings that had been in the hands of corrupt leaders for more than 60 years, they also started to take education in their own hands.

They perceived that it was not only the conditions in which they work that was at stake with this type of reform, but the foundation of the education itself, which they had participated in creating as part of the new nation emerged from the 1910-1917 Revolution. The popular, critical, and nationalistic vision of education was being replaced by the business orientation. That meant an emphasis on “quality,” “competencies,” “merit,” “ranking,” and created an atmosphere in which they, the poor, and their students will be persecuted or marginalized.

Coupled with the demonstrations and marches, teachers in several states organized “congresses” as they were called, which brought together hundreds of parents, in one occasion; large numbers of students in another; also communities and parents. From this, new proposals for education started to emerge as well as a rediscovery of many projects organized by teachers and communities founded years before. In these projects, pre-Hispanic languages were rescued as well as the culture they belong to in a very plural country (more than sixty different original languages). Teachers and communities also organized projects and services to benefit students and whole communities. In some states, like Oaxaca, Guerrero, Michoacán, full-fledged alternative schools were created, and all the schools of the state rejected standardized testing.

At the same time, in 2008, in the state of Chiapas, the Zapatista armed rebellion not only had achieved a form of relative autonomy, but also managed to create a whole education system as a substitute for government schools. Their schools go from elementary to middle school and then to the university level, with the so called “University of the Land.” This alternate system has very different curricula and the teachers are youngsters trained from the indigenous communities.

The winds of reform have reached the cities, as well. Student movements since the middle of the 1990s have opposed national standardized testing and protested the scarcity of spaces in higher education (México has one of the lowest levels of coverage in Latin America). Protests reached a peak in 1999-2000 when the National University (home of 300 hundred thousand students) was closed for nine months by a student movement. The students protested increased tuition fees, standardized testing, and time limits to complete studies and they demanded wider student participation on institutional decisions.

Because of these and other movements, the pressure for change mounted. As a result the local government—opposing the national neoliberal education policies—created a new type of university, the México City Autonomous University (UACM). UACM is publicly financed by the municipal and federal governments, free of any tuition costs, with no admission exam, and no

time limit to finish the studies. It is governed by a council of students and faculty and is especially dedicated to research, the diffusion of knowledge and the promotion of cultural expressions throughout the city. The faculty teach at the five university campuses as well seven different correctional facilities. UACM is currently starting a program that will create 16 cultural and learning centers in low-income areas, run by students and faculty. Students are very active politically and have defended their university against hostile government initiatives to change the fundamental law of the institution and turn it into a regular boring, expensive, and elitist university.

In these many ways, neo-liberal educational reforms have been counteracted by the creativity, initiative and strength of the popular and teachers' movements.

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