Mexican Teachers Rebel Against Government's Educational Reform

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Mexican teachers, particularly in the south of the country, have joined a regional rebellion of rank-and-file teachers that erupted in violence in late April. In the state of Guerrero the offices of all three major political parties were vandalized and set afire to protest their support for the educational reform passed by congress and the states over the last five months. At the same time there have been marches and demonstrations in several other states, and there are plans afoot to strike indefinitely beginning on May 1. Some 200,000 teachers have also filed legal actions either in groups or as individuals seeking an injunction against the government's education and labor reform acts that are at the root of the rebellion.

In addition to the demonstrations by the teachers, there have also been protests by the *normalistas*, students at the public teachers' colleges or normal schools, that are linked to the teachers union protests, but also raising the *normalistas*' own issues. Finally, in a matter not related to the teachers' protests but coinciding with them, a small group of unidentified young people seized the tower of the rectory at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) to draw attention to issues at the University and its affiliated high schools. While these movements taken together do not constitute a crisis for the new administration of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, they do represent a challenge, and it is the first major challenge from below.

The question is: Will the movement confined to the southern regions? Or will it become a national movement involving teachers and communities throughout the country? If it remains contained in the south, it is likely that the state governors backed by the federal government will be able to crush these components one at a time, while if it spreads and become a national movement, and especially if it spreads to other unions in the public sector and perhaps even in the private sector, it could change the balance of forces in the society and might well set Peña Nieto back on his heels. We turn now to look at the events that led to this situation and to see how they played out and what that suggests about future developments.

The Background: Education Reform

Teachers have been fighting what they see as an elite-imposed education reform now for almost six years. During the previous administration, President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) of the National Action Party (PAN) formed an alliance with Elba Esther Gordillo, then leader of the Mexican Teachers Union (el SNTE), the Alliance for Quality Education (ACE). While the union leadership embraced the plan, the 35-year-old rank-and-file opposition group, the National Coordinating Committee (la CNTE), opposed it at every turn with protests by tens of thousands. While la CNTE proved unable to stop the plan's implementation, in some areas of the country the teachers simply boycotted the meetings, examinations, and other elements of ACE.

When President Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) took office on December 1, 2012, he succeeded in convincing the other two major parties—the conservative PAN and the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)—to join his party in signing the "Pact for Mexico," fundamentally an agreement to support the new president's neoliberal agenda. The new president then presented to the Mexican Congress his education reform bill intended to reassert government control over the country's education system, break the power of the Mexican Teachers Union bureaucracy, and improve the quality of education. At the heart of the new law is a regular

teacher evaluation with increased emphasis on merit.

Congress put the bill on a fast track and passed it in short order, despite verbal opposition from el SNTE and demonstrations organized by la CNTE). In the following months, Mexico's 31 states also ratified the educational reform. Throughout the process, Mexican teachers, particularly in the south of the country, engaged in protests in front of the Mexican Congress and state legislatures, marched, demonstrated and sometimes struck. While the protests were national in scope, they were strongest in the southern states of Oaxaca and Chiapas and in the western states of Michoacán and Guerrero and in Mexico City in the Federal District.

On February 26, 2013, Peña Nieto's Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam charged teachers union president Gordillo with embezzling millions of dollars in union funds, engaging in money laundering, and depositing the funds in foreign banks. She was jailed and remains there awaiting trial. Gordillo had for more than twenty-five years been a major political leader in PRI and later became an ally of President Calderón of the PAN, though in the end both parties abandoned her. She had become a despised symbol of political and labor union corruption. Her arrest won support from all of the political parties, from many teachers, and from a wide swath of Mexican society. Peña Nieto, meanwhile, had removed a powerful political player who opposed his education reform scheme, even if she did so for her own reasons and not for the reasons that the union's leftwing rank-and-file movement objected to it.

The Opposition's Rejection of Reform

Why did la CNTE object to the educational reform? And what were the demands of the movement? Francisco Bravo, general secretary of Local 9 in the Federal district, a local aligned with la CNTE, said, "We have always insisted that teachers are not against evaluation, nor against the idea that the best should be chosen for the teaching career, but you can't simply disqualify everything that we do in the classroom without knowing the conditions we confront and the educational achievements we accomplish, even if these thing are not reflected in standardized tests."

Speaking before the violent events of April 24, Bravo said that Peña Nieto's educational reform "is condemned to failure before it reaches the classrooms, because it is a proposal that was reached by [political, governmental and union] leaderships in a unilateral way. We teachers have never been part of the discussion."

He said that an alternative was needed: "First, is to decide how decisions about education are going to be made, but also how to eradicate an authoritarian and vertical system that is imposed from the federal and state administrative offices down to the school classrooms."

Gilberto Maldonado, the leader of teachers in the National Democratic Executive Committee, another dissident teacher organization, said that the opposition teachers throughout the country agreed with the need for a "humanistic educational project that educates critical citizens not malleable consumers for the whims of the market."

The Violent Protests

While teachers have been protesting the education reform agenda for several years now, arguing that it will lead weaken teachers and their union and encourage privatization of education, the scope and militancy of the protests grew in February, March and April, particularly in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Michoacán, Morelos, and especially Guerrero. When on April 23 the Congress of Guerrero, meeting for security reasons in the resort city of Acapulco rather than in the state capital

of Chilpancingo, approved the reforms by a vote of 42 to 4, many of the state's teachers were enraged. The State Coordinating Committee of Educational Workers in Guerrero (CETEG) and its ally the Peoples Movement of Guerrero (MPG), backed by some of the state's voluntary community police organizations, organized a protest march and demonstration of 1,500 teachers and their supporters in Chilpancingo on April 24.

When the demonstration had concluded, a group of about 400 people continued to march through the city attacking the offices of the PRI, the PAN, the PRD, and the small Citizens Movement (MC) party. They also attacked offices of the Guerrero Secretary of Education. Doors were broken open, windows smashed, fires set, and secretaries working in the offices were terrified. The next day, MPG members returned to the center of Chilpancingo to stone the offices of Local 14 of el SNTE and the Superior Tribunal of Justice.

Guerrero Governor &AACUTE;ngel Aguirre Rivero ordered the arrest of two teachers, Minervino Morán Hernández and Gonzalo Juárez Ocampo (CETEG's general secretary), as the "intellectual authors" of the violent events, as well as the detention of 37 others.

Teachers Union Reactions to the Protest

While no one was injured as a result of the vandalism and arson, the violent demonstrations raised questions about the state of the movement. The CETEG leaders who had organized the protest march repudiated the violent attack on party offices. CETEG's general secretary said that the mayhem was created by "hooded individuals who claimed they were part of the MPG." He added that the media had then turned the events into a campaign to discredit and persecute the teacher activists. Ricardo Monreal of the left of center MC party suggested that government agents from the police or the military had infiltrated the teachers' demonstration and had led the violent assault on the offices.

The leadership of la CNTE called the violent events an "act of desperation" by the MPG and CETEG, but reaffirmed their "total support" for CETEG. La CNTE promised to dispatch a teachers' commission to Guerrero in an attempt to reduce tensions and find a peaceful solution to the problems. CETEG agreed to call off all protests until May 1, the International Labor Day, though it was not able to control protests by MPG or by *normalistas* who stoned buses that carried Federal Police officers on April 26.

Juan Díaz de la Torre, who succeeded Elba Esther Gordillo as head of el SNTE, said that he could not support the protests in Guerrero because the teachers had turned to violence. "It is important that Mexican society know that in Guerrero there are 78,000 teachers who belong to Local 14 of el SNTE. The immense, absolute majority of those 78,000 educators are in their classrooms working and carrying out their responsibilities. True, there is a group of *compañeros* (union brothers and sisters) that, even though we may agree with their aspirations, their needs and their demands, have not taken the right route."

On April 26 about 2,000 members of the Front of Organizations in Defense of Public Education (FODEP) in the State of Mexico marched in nearby Mexico City from the Angel of Independence to Los Pinos, the Mexican presidential residence, to protest "the criminalization of social protest and the implementation of the educational reform." Organizations participating included the Emiliano Zapata Popular Revolutionary Union, a community organization, other social movement organizations and some teachers.

The Political Response

Virtually all of the political parties in government or in the congress called for law and order. President Peña Nieto condemned the violence and offered his full support to Guerrero governor Aguirre Rivero. Miguel &AACUTE;ngel Osorio Chong, Minister of the Interior, said that he would support the state in responding to the teachers' violent acts. "I will send federal forces if they should be needed," he said. Congressional leaders of the PRI, PAN, PRD and the Green Ecological Party all repudiated the violent acts and called upon the government to use the law to prosecute those responsible.

Most outspoken was Governor of the State of Morelos, Graco Ramírez Garrido of the PRD, who called for a "heavy hand" to be applied against those who had committed violent acts in Guerrero. Saying that the teachers involved in the movement represented no more than 10 percent of the teachers in the state, he called upon the government to act as forcefully against the protestors responsible for the violence as it had against former teachers union head Gordillo. As a person of the left, said Ramírez Garrido, he could not accept protestors' threats against legislators. Yet within two days other PRD leaders were calling upon the government to avoid a heavy-handed approach and to seek dialogue with the teachers.

Martí Batres Guadarrama, the spokesman of the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA)—the political party led by former presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador that has just been formed and has no elected representatives in Congress—said that what had happened was caused by those who had signed the Pact for Mexico and had approved an educational reform that threatened the teachers' jobs.

López Obrador, head of the national committee of MORENA, called upon Mexican authorities to be careful "not to fall into the trap of violence" in responding to the teacher protests. He called upon both the government and la CNTE to avoid violence, since "it will resolve nothing." The teachers' problems, he said, were political, not police matters.

Javier Sicilia, leader of the Peace with Dignity and Justice movement, warned that the government should seek a dialogue with the teachers and other protestors at the university, because otherwise "the country could go up in flames, worse than the fires of the protests."

The Struggle Continues

While recognizing that the violent events that took place in Chilpancingo, Guerrero represent a challenge to the movement, the dissident teachers' movement continues to prepare its next actions to press the government to withdraw or renegotiate the education reform law. The local unions controlled by the dissidents and the opposition movement in the states of Chiapas, Michoacán, Oaxaca, and Guerrero, and some locals in the Federal District plan to participate in the strike planned for May 1, the International Labor Day. Teachers in Durango and Zacatecas also support the protest, though it is not clear how many will participate in a strike. Some teachers say that will be the beginning of a national teachers' strike of long duration. Teachers in the northern state of Nuevo Leon said that they will work, but under protest. In Local 56 in Veracruz the leadership said it will not participate in the May Day march for fear of provocation by "anarchist cells." Jesús Villanueva Gutiérrez, head of Local 6 in Colima, denounced teachers in Michoacán and Guerrero who would disturb law and order, saying that his members would not participate in the May Day march so as to avoid provocations.

The movement is demanding the return of fired teachers in various states to the classroom, and the liberation of teachers who have been arrested and jailed in the states of Sonora, Hidalgo, and Guerrero. In some states activists demanded the removal of leaders imposed by the national union and the right to elect their own union officials. Everywhere they demanded that this education

reform be cancelled and that teachers, including teachers from the dissident movement, be involved in future discussion of reform efforts.

At the Fifth National Education Conference called by la CNTE in Mexico City on April 28, and involving teachers from about 25 states, speakers declared that they continue to reject the “elitist” reform and the process that has excluded teachers, families, and students.

[This article and the quotations in it are based largely on the day-to-day reporting of events in *La Jornada*, the left-of-center Mexico City daily newspaper. See also the websites of theMexican Teachers Union, the National Coordinating Committee, the Secretary of Public Education, and Mexicanos Primeros an organization that supports the education reform.]

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