

Mexican Teachers Strike as School Year Begins Despite Militarization, Arrests, and Firings

August 25, 2015



Thousands of teachers in Mexico have gone on strike against the national government's Education Reform Law, doing so in the face of the militarization and arrest of teacher activists in Oaxaca and firings of teachers who have missed work in other states. The Mexican government and state governments are clearly attempting to break the dissident teachers movement that has for forty years led the fight for union democracy and teacher power.

Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, Secretary of the Interior (a position something like the vice-president of Mexico), has pledged that "Nothing will stop the education reform." Teachers, he said, should not be permitted to interfere with the schools, public buildings, or highways.

The teachers, led by the National Coordinating Committee (la CNTE) of the Mexican Teachers Union (el SNTE), struck on August 24, the first day of the school year in Mexico. The strike in 21 states-out of 31 states plus the Federal District-was estimated to have affected 20 about percent of Mexican schools, some 50,000 of the 228,000 elementary and high schools in the country. At least 13 la CNTE locals have agreed to carry out a national 48-hour strike.

"We are going forward confidently and with unity," said Antonio Castro López, a member of la CNTE's national executive committee, "knowing that union representing teachers in elementary and high schools throughout the country have been protesting against the Education Reform Law and the other structural reforms."

In the State of Oaxaca, the historic center of the teachers' movement, Governor Gabino Cué called upon the federal government to send the army, navy, and air force into the state because he was unable to control the 80,000 teachers there. Thousands of soldiers and police have been deployed in Oaxaca, creating an intimidating presence that has, nevertheless, failed to deter the teachers there. Cué has also called upon 570 mayors to report teacher absences to officials there.

Teacher strikes in Mexico have historically often go on for days or even weeks at a time, but under the new Education Reform Law teachers have been warned that if they miss more than three days without a legitimate excuse they will be fired. In Mexico City, some 84 teachers were fired for absences in the 2014-2015 school year, though the exact reasons for those firings were not clear. A spokesman for the dissident union movement said that none of those teachers had approached la CNTE for assistance with their defense.

In the state of Oaxaca some 15 teachers have also been arrested and charged with destroying election materials during the June 7 federal election. Teachers called for a boycott of that election, but in Oaxaca the teachers also shut down polling places and burned boxes and ballots.

While the teachers' movement has been strongest in Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guerrero, and Michoacán, this time the strike spread to two-thirds of the states in all regions of the country including Baja California on the northern border, Durango in the Northwest, Querétaro in the Center, and Tabasco in the Southeast. In most states where it took place, the strike was only partial, with some schools shut down and others operating as normal.