

Mexico's AMLO Is No Leftist, as His Handling of Covid Demonstrates

Since he took office in December of 2018, some on the left have argued that Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is a leftist, even a socialist. Some like Kurt Hackbarth defend AMLO's record, despite his



alliance with the banks and big business, his political coalition with a rightwing party, his commitment to maintaining Mexico as a leading petroleum producing country, and his dedication to the Maya Train that threatens indigenous communities and the environment. They defend AMLO's presidency despite the fact that he has overseen an increase in the country's already extraordinarily high murder rate. In the first half of 2020, there were 17,439 murders, a 1.7% increase on the same period last year, as well as a 9.2 percent rise in femicide, the murder of women. And finally there is AMLO's subservience to U.S. President Donald Trump, acting as his cop in policing Mexico's border to keep migrants out of the United States.

Maybe it is unfair to criticize AMLO for those things, as some say. Well, the coronavirus pandemic has given us yet another measure with which to judge AMLO's government. Amnesty International recently reported that since the pandemic began over 7,000 health workers have died around the world, and that "at least 1,320 health workers are confirmed to have died in Mexico alone, the highest known figure for any country." The United States is second, with 1,077 health worker deaths, but the U.S. has a population almost three times that of Mexico.

There have been many articles in Mexico, the United States, and other countries criticizing AMLO for his handling of the pandemic in a way that resembles the terrible policies of Trump and Jair Bolsonaro. Much as in the United States the government did not act swiftly, it has not had a consistent policy, and there is not enough testing and not enough tracing. But there are other problems as well.

The Lancet, the distinguished British medical journal decided to look more specifically at why Mexico should have such high numbers. First comes the lack of everything.

Less than three weeks after Mexico recorded its first COVID-19 case, staff from a Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) hospital blocked a Mexico City road, demanding medical supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE). At least 70 protests have followed, according to a report by six former health secretaries, with medical staff decrying shortages of supplies and tests, along with a lack of hospital infrastructure and even proper training.

While Mexico did finally get more supplies, health officials say they were often of poor quality.

There are many factors affecting Mexican health care workers. "A lot of people in the health sector workforce are basically working on informal contracts," Madeleine Penman of Amnesty told *Lancet*. "That affects a lot of things in terms of job security and access to sick leave."

Lancet also reported that Rafael Soto, an IMSS nurse and spokesperson for the National Union of Health Workers, said that unions representing health workers were keeping quiet on issues of workplace safety, preferring to please the government rather than address members' demands. Some protest leaders, he said, have had their jobs terminated by their employers or have been sanctioned by their unions. Unfortunately, such behavior, kowtowing to the boss and

punishing the members, is typical of many Mexican unions.

While the unions play a role, government is most responsible. Mexico has several government health agencies that cover most workers and the public in general, but for decades the budgets for these programs have been cut, including by AMLO. Defunding the public health systems and the low pay of public health physicians led many of them to take private sector jobs in addition to their government positions, as well as teaching. So doctors have divided loyalties and work too many hours.

Lancet also pointed out that many Mexican health workers suffer from some conditions common to the population at large, such as obesity and diabetes. These are conditions, present in the Mexican population only for the last 40 years, that a good public health system would work to eliminate.

As president, AMLO has responsibility for what happens on his watch, but clearly he inherited a profoundly corrupt system that he has failed to reform. The neoliberal governments of the last 40 years, and AMLO's government which is so proud of its austerity, have failed to maintain the health system. Mexican labor unions, in most cases creations of the state, fail to fight for workers. Not only is AMLO's government not socialist, it is not democratic, it is not competent, and it is not socially responsible. AMLO is a populist with a leftist image and rightist policies.

The Mexican people deserve better. Some of them are fighting to reform their unions and to organize forces to reform the government. We stand in solidarity not with AMLO's government but with those like the health workers mentioned here who are fighting from below to change it.