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Education Reform Runs into Resistance from Teachers in Poorer States

by Carlos Navarro
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A portion of the rank-and-file membership of the teachers’ union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, SNTE) are displeased with the recent overhaul of Mexico’s public-education system, and this discontent has taken the form of demonstrations in Guerrero and Oaxaca states and other areas. The education reform changes the Constitution to transfer important functions from the SNTE to the Secretaria de Educación Pública (SEP), including the evaluation, promotion, and training of teachers (SourceMex, Dec. 12, 2012). Under the reform, teachers would be promoted based on merit and aptitude, while the old system allowed the SNTE to use patronage and other methods to decide promotions.

No one exemplified the corrupt practices of the SNTE more than the union’s leader Elba Esther Gordillo, who used union funds to build her personal wealth. In what was seen as an effort to limit SNTE opposition to the reforms, which the Congress approved earlier this year, President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration arrested Gordillo on corruption charges (SourceMex, March 6, 2013). Gordillo’s trial opened in Mexico City on April 17.

But removing Gordillo from the spotlight did little to reduce opposition to the education reform, particularly in the impoverished states of Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Michoacán. While funding for teaching jobs has come from the federal budget, the SNTE determined the salary structure and hiring practices. In Guerrero, the site of the most vocal protests, teachers have earned between 6,000 pesos (US$495) and 20,000 pesos (US$1,650) per month, depending on qualifications and tenure, teachers and outside experts said.

But it has not been easy for someone to get into the teaching profession. Would-be teachers in the past have had to pay a high fee to obtain a teaching position, with most of the money going to a departing teacher and the rest to the SNTE and state officials.

This system has brought federal funds into remote rural communities that otherwise would not receive much funding. State governments have administered the budget for schools, but the money has come from Mexico City. "It's a source of income for the highlands and for the whole state," a veteran teacher in Guerrero told the Associated Press. "The teachers are the ones who feed the highlands."

The loss of the patronage system is one factor that has fueled protests in Guerrero and Oaxaca, led primarily by rural teachers.

Many protests centered in Guerrero state

But teachers in Guerrero, who have organized themselves into the Coordinadora Estatal de Trabajadores de la Educación de Guerrero (CETEG), contend that the dispute is more than just job security. They worry that the education reform does not directly address myriad problems unrelated to teacher qualifications, including class sizes of up to 40 students per class, curricula...
that promote rote learning over engagement, and a lack of state money for maintenance that forces parents to contribute a mandatory fee of more than 300 pesos (US$25) so that schools can pay for costs like classroom fans and fixing sports fields.

The CETEG made its extreme displeasure with the federal education reform known via a series of very visible protests, including some acts of vandalism, clashes with police, and three separate blockades of the Autopista del Sol during Easter week, a peak season for domestic tourism in Mexico. The highway connects Mexico City and the resort city of Acapulco.

The CETEG had a partner in a massive protest in the Guerrero state capital of Chilpancingo on April 7: members of vigilante patrols created to help protect local communities from drug-trafficking organizations. The two groups, coming together as the Movimiento Popular Guerrerense (MPG), vowed to continue protests against the federal government and the administration of Guerrero Gov. Ángel Aguirre Rivero, a member of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), until profound changes are made to the educational reform approved earlier this year.

The presence of other groups in the protests raised concerns even among center-left legislators in Congress. Jesús Zambrano, the national leader of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), called the participation of groups that have traditionally used arms during their protests "a worrying issue," adding that protests "can't be anti-government movements, they have to be movements that strengthen ... the Mexican state."

The MPG protestors were not armed during the protests in Guerrero, however, and the federal police officers who responded to remove the highway blockade also did not carry weapons, which kept violence to a minimum.

Despite some acts of vandalism, the protests have thus far been mostly peaceful, and the government response has been low-key. There was the potential for violence when authorities moved to unblock the Autopista del Sol, but conflict was minimal because both sides were unarmed.

Still, a concern is that demonstrations could turn violent if state or federal authorities begin an intense crackdown, as evidenced in the stern warning by administration officials to the MPG. "We're not going to respond to the threats that they've been making," said Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong. "We believe there are limits, and the limit is the rule of law."

For now, the Peña Nieto government has managed to keep the protests localized to a handful of states. "If it spreads into other states then it's a real problem. It means the government can't just plan on pushing the agenda from the top," said Federico Estévez, a political analyst at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM).

Some observers likened the alliance between local SNTE chapters and other members of civil society to the partnership that occurred in Oaxaca in 2006, when other groups joined teachers to demand the ouster of then Gov. Ulises Ruiz. The alliance—known as the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO)—was angry with Ruiz for quashing teacher raises while using state money to improve his image (SourceMex, Aug. 2, 2006, Sept. 13, 2006, and Nov. 1, 2006).

A common thread between the earlier Oaxaca protests and this year’s demonstrations is that they were both directed at a PRI governor. Protests against education reform are also taking place in
Oaxaca this year, including a SNTE takeover of a handful of shopping centers, even though the
government has changed hands. Gov. Gabino Cué Monteagudo, a member of the center-left
Movimiento Ciudadano (MC), now leads Oaxaca.

Some observers point out that the political party is not necessarily the target of the demonstrations
but rather the political elite who pushed through the reforms. This includes leaders of the
major political parties as well as federal legislators and the executive branch. "The protests
are a consequence of the discriminatory and authoritarian elites, who approved and enacted a
constitutional reform to overhaul education that did not have the support of those who were put
in charge of implementing: the teachers," the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada said in an
editorial.

Others see the conflict extending beyond education reform and becoming an internal struggle
between the center-left political establishment, which includes the PRD legislators who voted for
education reform, and the more radical leftist elements in the impoverished states in southeastern
Mexico. "The teachers’ conflict has turned from a simple debate on education to a fight inside the
left," Jorge Javier Romero, a researcher at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM) in
Mexico City and a member of the Coalición Ciudadana por la Educación, said in an interview with
the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. "Those people who are confusing the issue of education
with the internal conflict of the left are harming the effort to change the educational system."

CETEG leader Gonzalo Juárez Ocampo emphasized that the protests are intended as peaceful
demonstrations by a citizens’ movement. "We hope that the government understands that, and we
don't have to move to a different phase," he said.

Public support lacking for protestors
The teachers’ strikes have yet to gain the sympathy of Mexico’s public at large, and some critics
blame this on a media campaign to demonize the CETEG and protestors in other states. "The media
alchemy is at work again," Epigmenio Ibarra wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio.
"This is thanks to the saturation of propaganda on television and from opinion leaders on the radio
and in the print media."

In its editorial, La Jornada noted that the media attention has been focused solely on the protests
and not on the social factors related to the demonstrations, including poverty and the breakdown
of institutions. "State and federal authorities, including the respective legislative branches, have
very little maneuvering room to contain and solve a social conflict that they helped create," said the
newspaper.

"The teachers are justified in demanding job stability, just like workers in any other profession,"
columnist Pablo Gómez, a former PRD legislator, wrote in Milenio. "In this, the demand is for the
law to define with clarity the right to job security and stability."

Conversely, some observers see the criticism of the dissident teachers and SNTE chapters in some
states as justified and weeding out poor teachers as necessary to boost the quality of education in
Mexico. Fewer than half of Mexican children graduate from the equivalent of high school even
though the Mexican government devotes a greater share of its budget to education than all other
members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) except New
Zealand.
"Some teachers argue that their labor rights are being violated. But the reality is that they are simply looking to hold on to a teaching job that has come with certain union privileges," columnist Yuriria Sierra wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior. "They do not want to be evaluated and want to distance themselves from any possibility of losing their status as ‘teachers’ when they are not prepared to teach classes."

Nationally syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento said some community leaders who have joined the CETEG in Guerrero were trying to spread misinformation, such as suggesting that the education reform was a step toward privatizing the educational system or eliminating the state guarantee of free education. "I can understand the resistance to teacher evaluations, especially from those who know that they have a very low level of preparation," said Sarmiento. "But [the dissident teachers] are hurting themselves politically when they suggest that the purpose of the new law is to eliminate free education for the poor."

National union leaders attempt to appease dissidents

National SNTE leaders are supporting the federal education reform but also trying to appease the teachers by reassuring them that their jobs are not only safe but will come with additional perks, such as training opportunities. "[As teachers] you are going to retain the rights you obtained through the years. This is our commitment," Juan Díaz de la Torre, president of the SNTE executive council, said in a statement prepared for members around the country. "Therefore, I ask for unity, along with your hard work and support."

Some critics contend that Díaz de la Torre, who took Gordillo’s place at the helm of the SNTE, has become a puppet of the Peña Nieto government. "There is not much publicity around the fact that Peña Nieto has thrown his full support behind Juan Díaz de la Torre," Axel Didriksson wrote in an opinion piece published by Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro).

Didriksson noted that Díaz de la Torre’s name appeared in the diagram of Gordillo’s corruption network that the administration developed when it went after the SNTE leader. "The operational structures responsible for the fraudulent use of public resources and union dues remain intact," the columnist pointed out.

Peña Nieto is adamant that education reform will not be scrapped and that the law is "non-negotiable." But the president on several occasions offered an olive branch to the dissident teachers. Speaking to reporters during a trip to China in early April, Peña Nieto said his government is open "to dialogue and to hearing different views."

A week later, upon his return home, the president repeated the message during a press conference at the presidential residence of Los Pinos. "We are listening to the dissident voices that are resistant to change because we need to have a positive attitude toward what Mexico needs on this issue, which is a higher quality education [system]," said Peña Nieto, adding that "only with the formation of human capital and better training and preparation will Mexico become a more productive country."

The Mexican Congress has also offered to enter into a dialogue with the teachers, but some legislators also criticized the CETEG’s actions. "Violence only generates more violence, and the teachers’ concerns, which may be very legitimate, should be expressed at the tables of dialogue that have been established," said Deputy Silvano Aureoles, floor leader for the PRD in the lower house.
Despite the stern warning, the PRD was instrumental in creating a space for the Congress and the CETEG to begin conversations. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on April 16, 2013, reported at 12.19 pesos per US$1.00.]

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