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Regional Teachers Union Holds Demonstrations in Mexico City to Protest Public-Education Reforms

by Carlos Navarro
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President Enrique Peña Nieto’s public-education reform has encountered some unexpected hiccups because of opposition from labor—but the opposition has not come from the beleaguered Sindicato Nacional de los Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE), the country’s largest teachers union. The pushback is coming from the smaller Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE), whose base is centered in the poor states of southern Mexico—Oaxaca, and parts of Guerrero, Chiapas, and Michoacán.

The CNTE has organized a series of very vocal protests against Peña Nieto’s education reform, which the Congress approved a few months ago. Legislators had to pass several secondary laws before the initiative could be enacted. The approval in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate came in early September.

The public-education reform in essence transfers the power to determine public-education policies from the SNTE to the federal government. Under the new law, the Secretaria de Educación Pública (SEP) would create an autonomous agency known as the Instituto Nacional de Evaluación Educativa (INEE) to determine procedures and policies for evaluating teachers, programs, student progress, and local school authorities (SourceMex, Dec. 12, 2012).

Peña Nieto had anticipated some opposition from the SNTE, which represents two-thirds of the teachers in Mexico. While many individual SNTE members have expressed strong opposition to the changes, the country’s largest teachers union has made no organized effort to overturn the changes. This is in part because the president moved to neutralize opposition by arresting long-time SNTE leader Elba Esther Gordillo on corruption charges in March of this year (SourceMex, March 6, 2013). Gordillo opposed the changes, but her replacement Juan Díaz de la Torre has come out in support of Peña Nieto’s plan.

Demonstrators primarily from poor states

The CNTE, which broke off from the SNTE in 1979 because of a lack of representation from the southwestern states in the union leadership, has moved to fill the void by staging its own protests. Teachers from the poor states had already made their displeasure with education reform widely known (SourceMex, April 17, 2013) and took their discontent a step further by organizing demonstrations in Mexico City, with the assistance of the center-left Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena). The protests started in mid-August as Congress was preparing to consider the secondary laws that would enable the enactment of the education reform.

To express its discontent with the education reform, the CNTE twice blocked the road leading to the Mexico City International Airport, once in mid-August and again in early September. Several thousand CNTE demonstrators and their Morena allies also took over the large Zócalo Square in Mexico City and organized a huge march to the presidential palace of Los Pinos.
While SNTE members in Oaxaca were already supporting the CNTE, there has been little support from members of the larger union in other parts of the country. Morena leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador attempted to change this by appealing to rank-and-file SNTE members to join the demonstrations. The Morena leader urged the two unions "to leave your differences to one side, close ranks, and unite to turn back this reform that’s contrary to the interests of teachers."

While the CNTE demonstrations have been loud and noisy, leaders have said they do not object in principle to the concept of teacher evaluations, only to what the union considers a "punitive" scheme devised by the government to weed out many teachers.

Some analysts say the complaint is legitimate, and teachers from both from the SNTE and the CNTE have reason for concern. "The approval of the new law (Ley General del Servicio Profesional Docente, LGSPD) would literally leave on the street a multitude of teachers who have training in education, are dedicated to their students, and committed to national development. This is all because of a discriminatory test and the excuse that they failed to meet standards," political columnist John Ackerman wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. "This would result in an enormous waste of human capital, which would seriously damage our country."

The attention to the direct impact of education reform on teachers has overshadowed another CNTE complaint, which is that the new requirements could threaten the right of all Mexicans to receive a free public education. In a statement on its Web site, the CNTE also opposes the school calendar developed by the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) for 2013-2014, which the union says would "violate the labor rights of education workers."

In the text of its opposition to the public-education reform, the union also took the opportunity to bring up some old political complaints. "They continue to insist that the state and federal governments punish former Oaxaca Gov. Ulises Ruiz and provide proof that dissident teachers who disappeared several years ago, including Carlos René Román Salazar and Guadalupe Pérez Sánchez, are alive," said Leo Zuckerman, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior.

In 2006, teachers in Oaxaca—primarily members of a local chapter of the SNTE—joined other groups to demand the ouster of former Gov. Ruiz for quashing teacher raises while using state money to improve his image (SourceMex, Aug. 2, 2006, Sept. 13, 2006, and Nov. 1, 2006)

While the CNTE’s demands might gain sympathy from a segment of the Mexican population, critics point out that the protestors’ tactics of taking over the streets and snarling traffic have earned disdain from many residents of the capital, particularly small businesses. For example, the Cámara Nacional De Comercio, Servicios Y Turismo En Pequeño reported that the first blockade of the road to the Mexico City airport in August caused small enterprises to lose between 60% and 87% of their business for that day. The complaints are similar to those lodged in 2006, when López Obrador and his supporters took over an important corridor in Mexico City for an extended period to protest the results of the presidential elections that year (SourceMex, Aug. 30, 2006, and Sept. 20, 2006).

**Issue surfaces at state-of-the-nation address**

The CNTE and other labor organizations, including the dissident electrical workers union (Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas, SME), had planned large protests for Peña Nieto’s State of the Nation address on Sept. 2. Many SME members lost their jobs when ex-President Felipe Calderón disbanded the regional state-run electric power company Compañía Luz y Fuerza del Centro (LFC).
and transferred its operations a larger state-run electric company (Comisión Federal de Electricidad, CFE) in 2009 (SourceMex, Oct. 21, 2009).

The CNTE, SME, and other groups held large demonstrations on the first day of the congressional session on Sept. 1, the day the president was scheduled to deliver his speech in front of Mexican legislators. Because of the potential for disruption, Peña Nieto postponed the address by a day and delivered it from the presidential palace instead of Campo Marte, a large complex in Mexico City used for military exercises and equestrian events. The interior secretary presented the written version of the speech to the Congress on Sept. 1. A presidential spokesperson said the change was to reduce disruptions for residents of the capital.

Critics chided the president for making the change. "Cornered in Los Pinos, under a tarp normally used for weddings and props from Televisa … Enrique Peña Nieto led a ritual that marked his first State of the Nation address," columnist Álvaro Delgado wrote in a piece carried by Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro). "He attempted to hide what everyone else knows: that the country is a disaster."

The president used the speech to praise the Chamber of Deputies for passing the secondary laws that made enactment of the education reform a reality. "[Teacher evaluation] is essential for achieving quality in education," the president said, noting that he expected the Senate to follow suit. The upper house approved the secondary laws on Sept. 4, two days after the speech.

"The country is in such bad shape that the only 'achievement' that Peña was able to highlight in his speech was the change in the secondary laws related to education," Delgado said in his piece entitled "Contrainforme."

"The [approval of secondary laws for education reform] emboldened him to threaten to adopt a hard line to impose privatization of our oil industry and the imposition of a value-added tax on food and medicines," added Delgado, referring to the president’s plan to reform the energy sector (SourceMex, July 31, 2013, and Aug. 28, 2013) and the effort to overhaul Mexico’s tax structure.

Other columnists offered a more positive assessment of the president’s brief tenure in office. "In the midst of a heated political and social environment marked by protests and demonstrations related to the reforms to education and the banking system (SourceMex, June 26, 2013) and the coming changes to the tax system and energy, the president offered the five principal areas in which his government is focused," columnist Fernando Schutte Elguero wrote in the Mexico City daily business newspaper El Financiero. "What’s more important is that he put a priority on proposing ideas and offering his agenda and on the challenges awaiting in the less than 120 days that remain in the year, especially in the legislative arena."

-- End --