Conflict Resurfaces Between Teachers Union and Administration over Education Reforms

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A bitter conflict between Mexican authorities and members of the dissident teachers union, the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE), resurfaced in May after teachers called a strike in four southern states to demand, among other things, the repeal of education reforms that were approved in 2012 and enacted in 2013 under the administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto.

Members of the CNTE in the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guerrero, and Michoacán were also demanding salary increases, reinstatement of teachers who had been fired, and a resolution to the disappearance of 27 students from a teachers college (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos) in Guerrero state (SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014).

The biggest beef for the CNTE members is the education reform, which included the transfer of several important functions from the teachers unions—including the larger teachers organization, the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE)—to the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP). These functions include the evaluation, promotion, and training of teachers. 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 (SourceMex, Dec. 12, 2012).

Teachers strike in four states

Some members of the SNTE opposed the measure when it was first proposed, but that union did not officially participate in this year’s protests. While the SNTE has a larger presence in most of Mexico, the CNTE is very strong in the four southern states where the protests were held, which have high rates of rural poverty (SourceMex, April 17, 2013).

The CNTE reiterated the concerns, saying several aspects of the education reform are unfair to teachers around the country, particularly the mandatory evaluations, which test the knowledge and skills of teachers and their abilities in the classroom. Any teacher who fails the evaluation is subject to dismissal.

On May 15, as many as 15,000 CNTE members organized a massive march in Mexico City to demand a meeting with administration officials to discuss their concerns. However, the Peña Nieto government said there was nothing to discuss. “There won’t be any dialogue regarding the education reforms,” Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong and Education Secretary Aurelio Nuño Mayer said in a prepared statement. “These reforms have benefitted our country, our youth, our children, our teachers.”

Nuño Mayer later explained his comments in an interview with the daily newspaper Reforma: “As long as [the CNTE’s] request for dialogue involves the elimination of the education reforms or the awarding of automatic slots for union members seeking teaching jobs, then there is no sense in holding a dialogue.”
CNTE officials, for their part, said the administration agreed to hold a discussion, but on matters that were not substantive. “They offered us a round-table for talks, but not with anyone able to resolve anything, not with any high-ranking officials,” Salvador Almanza, the CNTE secretary in Michoacán, told the Spanish news service EFE.

The CNTE members in the four states were already aware of the Peña Nieto government’s opposition to their demands and were prepared to go on strike. The walkout appears to have achieved its initial goal, which was to bring national attention to the concerns of the teachers.

“The information we received suggests that the union effectively succeeded in closing the majority of the schools in these states,” wrote nationally syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento. “The rank-and-file teachers were not necessarily in favor of the action, but none dared to go against the wishes of the leadership. To try to teach a class when the CNTE had declared a strike would subject one to an act of violence.”

However, administration sources said any widespread closure was short-lived. According to Nuño Mayer, as of May 20, the majority of schools were open in Chiapas, Guerrero, Michoacán and Oaxaca.

**Peña Nieto government takes hard line**

The administration took a hard line against the striking teachers and followed through with its threats to dismiss those who stayed away for more than four days. On May 21, Nuño Mayer announced that the SEP had begun dismissal proceedings against more than 4,250 teachers in the four states after they failed to show up for work.

“The federal government and the state governments are going to do everything to comply with the law,” Nuño Mayer said. “The law requires that boys and girls have the right to learn, and this means that classes must be held.”

The teachers responded by holding a series of demonstrations, marches, and blockades in major cities, including Chilpancingo, Zihuatanejo, Morelia, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Acapulco, and Oaxaca.

Many CNTE members made their discontent known by breaking into post offices to retrieve and burn SEP letters notifying teachers of their dismissal for failing to show up for work for four consecutive days.

“Surely the lists that Nuño released includes many leaders of our movement,” said Carlos Botello, a CNTE leader in Guerrero state. “We will not be intimidated. In fact, the repressive measure will only encourage us to intensify our actions.”

The SEP said it had a list of 26,000 teachers who were prepared to take the spots of the educators who were dismissed. However, Nuño acknowledged the transition would not be smooth. “It would probably be a difficult task, but not impossible,” the education secretary said in an interview with TV Milenio. “It would be something unprecedented [but] I believe the state must show that no one is indispensable in an institutional system; they are necessary, of course, but no one is indispensable.”

Union leaders said authorities would have to appease many of the parents of the students, who are siding with the CNTE. “We are convinced that the parents are going to support us,” said Guadalupe Liquin, a CNTE member in Michoacán.
The CNTE and others cast doubts on the qualifications of the potential substitute teachers. “I doubt that even 99% of [the substitutes] are actually teachers,” said Óscar Sereno Pareja, a union spokesperson in Guerrero.

Some observers voiced the same opinion. “It would be interesting to know where the substitutes who will fill in for the fired teaches come from,” F. Bartolomé wrote in the Templo Mayor column in the daily newspaper Reforma. “I would especially like to know if those teachers will be evaluated and certified or whether they will have to undergo the process [required under the education reforms].”

The administration attempted to demonstrate that the strikers are only a small percentage of the teachers in Mexico.

On the same week that the teachers began their strike, Nuño Mayer spoke at a ceremony at the presidential palace of Los Pinos where teachers were recognized for their outstanding performance. “These are the teachers who are committed, whose work is not just a job,” the education secretary said during the event, which was attended by Peña Nieto. “A teacher believes that education is a lifetime vocation.”

One of the teachers recognized at the ceremony defended the changes to Mexico’s education system enacted during the current administration. “The education reforms represent a real change that we have sought for a long time,” said Enrique Vidal Martínez, who teaches secondary school in Mexico City. “I believe that they benefit teachers, families, and especially the students.”

Critics question education secretary’s qualifications

Nuño, who has been in his post for less than a year, replaced Emilio Chuayffet at the helm of the SEP during a cabinet shake-up in September 2015 (SourceMex, Sept. 2, 2015). Chuayffet, who oversaw the implementation of the education reforms, experienced his share of battles with the teachers unions (SourceMex, Dec. 12, 2012).

Chuayffet came to the SEP post with a long history of public service, including stints as governor and a member of the Chamber of Deputies. Conversely, Nuño, who was an adviser to Peña Nieto when he was appointed to the post, had very little experience in education, although he served a six-year term in the Senate as a member of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

“Nuño does not have one iota of experience as an educator, nor is he a brilliant politician who can make a difference in the educational future of millions of children and youth who currently experience an environment filled with violence, uncertainty, and conflict,” columnist José Gil Olmos wrote in the weekly news magazine Proceso. “Does anyone know what vision Nuño has for education? I don’t think that anyone does. Not even his closest collaborators have an answer to this basic question.”