Teachers’ Union Strikes, Sets up Blockades to Force Government to Abandon Education Reforms

Carlos Navarro

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Teachers’ Union Strikes, Sets up Blockades to Force Government to Abandon Education Reforms

by Carlos Navarro
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2016-07-06

The power struggle between the regional teachers’ union (Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, CNTE) and federal authorities has escalated to a full-fledged confrontation, which has resulted in violence and a blockade of several important highways that have left many areas of southern Mexico without important supplies. Both sides have dug in their heels over an important issue: education reform. The CNTE is pushing for the elimination of new regulations that were enacted with the reforms (SourceMex Dec. 12, 2012, and April 17, 2013), while President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration insists that the changes are irrevocable. Tensions between the two sides have simmered for several months, but the conflict erupted when members of the CNTE called a strike in May (SourceMex, May 25, 2016).

Protests turn deadly
The CNTE organized a series of marches and highway blockades during May and June, but some of those protests turned deadly when state and federal police moved to clear highways in Oaxaca, including the important roadway connecting the cities of Oaxaca and Puebla.

The confrontations resulted in the deaths of eight CNTE members and numerous injuries on both sides. In a radio interview, Jorge Ruiz Martínez, Oaxaca’s state secretary for public safety, said eight people died in two separate confrontations. Six died near the town of Nochixtlán, about 80 kilometers northwest of the capital city of Oaxaca. Two others were killed in related confrontations in Juchitán, located in the southeastern region of the state.

Juan García, a CNTE coordinator, told reporters that the movement would continue the strikes and respond “in a forceful, orderly and peaceful manner” to aggression from the government.

Still, the death of the protesters angered the CNTE and its followers, prompting Peña Nieto to pledge support from the federal government to the state of Oaxaca to investigate the incident. "I’ve given instructions so that... actions can be taken to solve the conflict," the president wrote on Twitter.

Others also called on the administration to favor dialogue over repression. “We believe that the corresponding authorities should bet on the side of dialogue, recognizing the just demands of the teachers’ movement, and not resort to force to resolve this and any other conflict, particularly in a country that is already suffering from violence and impunity,” said a letter signed by a group of intellectuals.

The president’s promise to investigate the violent repression in Oaxaca sounded hollow to the protesters and others who have followed the president’s political career. Peña Nieto was governor of México state during a bloody incident where riot police fired on a crowd of protesters in the communities of San Salvador Atenco and Texcoco over a dispute regarding vending regulations
More than 3,000 municipal, state, and federal forces participated in the operation, which resulted in two deaths.

In reply to a question during an appearance at Universidad Iberoamericana during the presidential campaign in 2012, Peña Nieto acknowledged that he had ordered the use of force in that incident. “I made the decision to use force in order to establish the peace,” then candidate Peña Nieto told the skeptical student audience (SourceMex, May 23, 2012). “Regrettably, there were some incidents [of unnecessary force], which were appropriately sanctioned.”

More recently, there are questions on the role of the Peña Nieto administration in the disappearance and likely murder of 43 students from a teachers’ college (Escuela Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa Raúl Isidro Burgos) in Guerrero state. Initial investigations ascribed blame to the municipal and state governments (SourceMex, Oct. 15, 2014, and Oct. 29, 2014). However, there are reports that members of the federal Army and federal police were present at the site during the attack on the students and either stood by passively or participated in some form in the incident (SourceMex, Sept. 16, 2015, and Nov. 18, 2015).

Peña Nieto did not help his case when his administration blocked the investigation conducted by an independent group of experts sent to Mexico by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in 2015 and 2016 (SourceMex, April 20, 2016).

**Key union leader taken into custody**

To make matters worse, the Peña Nieto administration responded to the blockades by ordering the arrest of nearly a dozen key leaders, including Rubén Núñez Ginez and Francisco Villalobos Ricádez. The arrest of Núñez Ginez, leader of Section 22 of the CNTE in Oaxaca, was a major slap in the face to the CNTE, since he was imprisoned on charges unrelated to the protests—laundering more than 24 million pesos (US$1.3 million).

“If we’re forced to take to the streets, it’s so the government will realize we’re here,” said Everardo Hernández, member of executive committee of CNTE Local 7 in Chiapas state.

However, the Ayotzinapa case has cast a shadow on the Peña Nieto administration’s approach to the recent incidents in Oaxaca. Shortly after the deaths in Nochixtlán and Juchitán, the administration agreed to hold a dialogue with the CNTE.

“It is clear that Enrique Peña Nieto and the [governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional] do not want another Ayotzinapa in Oaxaca, and that is why they have opted to hold discussions around the education reform,” columnist Samuel Ponce Morales wrote in the daily newspaper Cambio de Michoacán.

**Government, union hold meetings**

Interior Secretary Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong hosted a meeting with members of the CNTE in late June, which he described as a fruitful first step towards an eventual resolution of the conflict. The five-hour meeting led to a single accord, which was to hold a second round of talks.

The second meeting failed to resolve differences between the two sides, partly because of the government’s new condition that the union remove all blockades in six states, including Oaxaca. The teachers refused, seeing the blockades as leverage in their negotiations.
The two sides remain far apart, with the federal government remaining adamant that the reforms are here to stay, while the CNTE wants to eliminate them altogether.

“We are going to evaluate the proposals from the government,” said CNTE leader Mario Martínez Cruz. “However, [Education Secretary Aurelio Nuño] has already said that any negotiations will not include the reforms, which is the reason why we went on strike.”

Some analysts noted that the discontent with the education reforms is only one part of the equation for the teachers, who also want to press for other concessions, including the reinstatement of teachers who were dismissed because of poor attendance and the immediate release of all “political prisoners” and “prisoners of conscience” in Oaxaca.

The teachers have had history of conflict with authorities in Oaxaca, particularly with the administration of former Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz (SourceMex, Aug. 2, 2006, and Nov. 1, 2006). Ruiz took a hardline approach against the salary requests by the teachers, who at that time were represented by the national union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, SNTE).

The SNTE has generally remained on the sidelines during the recent dispute, but some members of that organization—which opposed the education reforms—have stepped forward in support of the CNTE.

Heavy economic losses

In the meantime, the highway blockades have isolated several communities in the states of Oaxaca, Guerrero, Chiapas, Tabasco, Michoacán, and Nuevo León, causing food and fuel shortages in many areas. According to the umbrella organization for business chambers in Mexico (Confederación de Cámaras Nacionales de Comercio, Servicios y Turismo, CONCANACO SERVYTUR), the blockades resulted in economic losses of about 7.5 billion pesos (US$399 million) between the end of May and the end of June.

The blockade has had an especially negative impact on the city of Oaxaca, where members of the local chapter of the Asociación Mexicana de Hoteles y Moteles (AMHM) reported occupancy rates near zero in June. According to the AMHM, 95% of reservations have been cancelled just two weeks before the city’s famous Guelaguetza festival.

“We can no longer allow these actions, which put at risk the lives of people and property and affect the economic growth and image of Mexico,” said CONCANACO SERVYTUR president Enrique Solana Sentíes.

However, Solana Sentíes emphasized that the matter should be resolved via dialogue.

Others noted the impact of the blockades on indigenous communities in Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Chiapas, which are among the poorest in Mexico. “How are the poorest indigenous communities of Oaxaca at fault? They can no longer buy corn, rice, corn flour, sugar, and beans through the government stores because these products are not arriving because of the blockades,” Raúl Flores Martínez wrote in the online news site ElArsenal Diario Digital.

The government has attempted to address the problem by airlifting food to distribution centers near the communities most affected by shortages.
“A minority is willing to confront the federal police, regardless of consequences, because it believes it is defending free public education,” columnist Pablo Hiriart wrote in the daily newspaper El Financiero. “They are fooling themselves. The reality is that they are defending the privileges [of union leaders].”

However, the teachers are not alone in their conflict with the government. Several parents and indigenous and human rights activists have joined with the CNTE in organizing the protests and erecting the blockades.

Most of the blockades remained in place at the beginning of July, and the union said they would continue. However, there have been signs that the blockades are not as tight as they once were. According to news reports, a handful of transport trucks were seen arriving in coastal communities, and many service stations were pumping gas. “There were deliveries being made by the courier firm DHL, one of the despised transnational companies whose vehicles the union has refused to allow through blockades,” said the online English-language site Mexico News Daily.

-- End --