

# Mexican government imposes education “reform” over teacher protests

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Last month, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto signed into law a national system implementing standardized evaluations of public school teachers. Over a year and a half of efforts to block this attack on Mexican teachers by a militant wing of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), the National Committee of Education Workers (CNTE), has ultimately come to naught.

A law providing for comprehensive changes to the Mexican educational system was the first major measure passed as part of Peña Nieto’s Pact for Mexico reforms (counter-reforms really) in December 2012. All three major Mexican political parties, Peña Nieto’s Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the right-wing National Action Party (PAN), and the center-“left” Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) signed on to the Pact.

The educational overhaul aimed to transfer much of the union’s power over education to the federal government. Particularly explosive was its mandate to create a system of uniform standards for teacher hiring and promotion based on “merit,” a reform very similar to US President Barack Obama’s 2009 Department of Education “Race to the Top” program. The canard put forth was that prior union control over jobs led to promoting poorly trained teachers over those more qualified, and permitted union corruption.

The reform ignored the dismal lack of funding and infrastructure and the widespread poverty faced by millions of Mexican school children. Many schools lack floors, bathrooms, Internet, or even telephone access, and in rural areas roads to schools often do not exist.

Ultimately, the education reform represented an effort by the Mexican ruling class to discredit and divide teachers from parents and the rest of the population, by

accusing them of being overpaid and incompetent. It is part of an attack on the working class by the handful of billionaire oligarchs that effectively control Mexican politics and seek to subordinate education to the profit needs of big business and international finance.

A day after the initial education bill was signed into law, Peña Nieto’s Attorney General announced the arrest of Elba Esther Gordillo, the longtime head of the 1.5 million-member SNTE, on charges she embezzled \$160 million in union funds. Gordillo had abandoned the PRI and supported the PAN in the 2012 election, while beginning to organize demonstrations against the proposed educational reforms. The SNTE then quickly fell into line with the PRI and the education overhaul.

Opposition then fell to the CNTE, particularly where it is strongest, in the poor southern Mexican states of Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Michoacán, where teachers are paid around \$300 a month. Through militant tactics such as blocking roads and attacking offices of the major political parties, CNTE-affiliated groups in those states at times gained temporary concessions from state legislatures, such as agreements to keep public education free.

The CNTE’s main opposition to reform has centered on its call for a “democratic evaluation process,” code words for the union keeping a seat at the table with the government in determining teacher hiring and discipline. In other words, rather than outright rejection of the reactionary plan, it included the demand that the union be included as a government partner.

Repeating the tactics used in prior state struggles, in September 2013, CNTE contingents and supportive peasant and popular organizations occupied the historic Zócalo in downtown Mexico City with a large-scale sit-in. They also blocked roads and highways. This provoked violent attacks and eviction by thousands of

anti-riot police and armored vehicles at the country's most emblematic plaza.

In April 2014, a census report on pre-, elementary, and middle schools mandated by the initial December 2012 legislation was released. In an attempt to smear teachers, the report purported to reveal that of 978,000 teachers on the payroll at those school levels, 115,000 were being paid after quitting, retiring or dying, and that 39,000 "imaginary" teachers were on the rolls.

However, the report was also forced to concede that at least a third of the schools at this level, which house 2 million students, face severe infrastructure problems, with 41 percent lacking sewage systems and 31 percent with no drinkable water. It admitted that at least a \$4 billion funding gap exists for this section of the public educational system.

Over the last year, the CNTE maintained its physical presence at the Monument of the Revolution in downtown Mexico City. Several times a month, contingents blocked access to key downtown locations and roads. Shutting down schools and making life inconvenient in the heart of Mexico's economic and political center became its only tool.

Mexico City's government has not intervened against the teacher protests over the last year. Miguel Angel Mancera, the capital's PRD mayor, wants to run for president in 2018, and so has avoided open confrontation.

When Peña Nieto signed off on the final bill implementing national teacher evaluations two weeks ago, 3000 teachers, after having been kept from entering the Zócalo by 200 Mexico state anti-riot police, seized two of Mexico City's central thoroughfares and marched to the president's residence at Los Piños, causing traffic chaos. Teachers also blocked highways and city centers in at least 15 Mexican states in response to a call by CNTE for a national day of protest.

CNTE leaders now say that blocking the reform itself is no longer the point; they have launched a "new phase" of trying to maintain pressure to protect their rights as the government puts the new hiring and firing measures into effect. They said they would establish a new "negotiation strategy." Finally, they promised to organize CNTE members with union members and popular organizations in order to build for a national strike in 2015. The bankruptcy of the CNTE strategy is

now there for the Mexican working class to see.

For years, the CNTE subordinated the struggles of teachers to the PRD and its then presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Now that the PRI has signed on to the Pact for Mexico, the CNTE undoubtedly will hitch its cart to Lopez Obrador's new MORENA party.

But MORENA is just another bourgeois nationalist party that the Mexican bourgeoisie will use to head off the Mexican working class from social revolution. Its vaguely reformist demands promote the illusion that mass poverty and unemployment in Mexico can be eliminated by "democratizing" the Mexican state.

The CNTE and their allied popular organizations are determined to continue with the same bankrupt methods and program, substituting militancy and radicalism for a political struggle that mobilizes all Mexican workers independently of the ruling class parties, including MORENA.

Time and time again, the corporatist union apparatus in Mexico has been used to ensure maximum capitalist exploitation and minimum working class resistance. Trade union organizations such as the Congress of Labor, which includes the Federation of Mexican Workers, have conspired with Mexican and global capitalist firms and financial institutions. In the final analysis, the logic of the CNTE and its politics lead to the same dead end.

Defeating the "reform" drive for privatization of education and attacks on teachers requires the development of a political offensive by teachers and the entire working class of Mexico, independent of the bureaucratized trade unions. Such a movement, which would find allies among teachers in the US facing the same kind of attacks, must be based on the demand for the material resources necessary for quality public education for all, as part of a revolutionary struggle against the capitalist profit system.



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