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Repression and electoral fraud

Showdown in Mexico

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On 16 August Mexican president Vicente Fox sent 800 federal riot police with armoured cars to guard the parliament building in Mexico City, against the possibility of attack by the tens of thousands of protestors occupying the centre of the city in a semi-permanent encampment. The protestors are demonstrating against the giant fraud in July's presidential election, which robbed centre-left candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (popularly known as 'AMLO') of victory, and handed the presidency instead to right-winger Felipe Calderón, candidate of Fox's National Action Party (PAN).

This summer has witnessed a series of harsh struggles and street battles as the outgoing government of Vicente Fox sought to stem the rising tide of social protest - using the traditional methods of the Mexican elite - vicious repression and electoral fraud on a grand scale.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/teachersoaxaca.jpg>]

Teachers rally in Oaxaca

While the protests are currently centered on the electoral fraud, over the summer there have been several other key battles - a mass movement in the state of Oaxaca to bring down the corrupt right-wing government (including a 44-day strike by Oaxaca schoolteachers leading that mass movement), a prolonged strike by miners and steelworkers and a huge conflict with federal and state riot police in the militant community of San Salvador Atenco in Mexico state.

There is more to come. Already Lopez Obrador's centre-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) has set a series of dates for mass mobilisations going into the autumn, mobilisations which could easily escape its control.

Why has this huge social conflict built up over the summer? Two factors underlie much of the tension - the build up to the presidential election which the Mexican oligarchy, in close collaboration with the United States, was desperate not to lose to even the moderate left, and the progress of the 'Other Campaign' - the project of uniting and building Mexico's social movements from below, launched by Subcommandante Marcos and the EZLN a year ago.

But behind these factors are more fundamental issues. Since the election as president of right-wing Svengali and narcho-politician in chief Carlos Salinas de Gotari in 1988, Mexico has been suffering the continued pressure of neoliberalism, which in as a result of the NAFTA agreement has wrecked traditional communal peasant agriculture and devastated agricultural communities.

The net result is an avalanche of migrants to the cities, particularly Mexico City, flooding the ranks of the informal economy and with it urban mass poverty in the huge edge of town barrios. Social inequality has deepened massively, in a country already one of the most unequal in the world. Like Brazil, Mexico is a country where the rich live like the rich in Switzerland and the poor live like the poor in India.

Social tensions have been high since the emergence of the Zapatista indigenous movement in 1994. With no independent mass party representing the interests of the workers and the poor, Subcommandante Marcos and the EZLN have acted as a sort of substitute leadership, giving consistent support to every militant struggle. But paradoxically the Zapatistas themselves have been largely confined to their Chiapas mountain strongholds, a limitation that the Other Campaign aims to overcome.

How has this spring and summer of battle unfolded?

Miners and steelworkers strike

More than a quarter of a million miners and steelworkers walked off the job between March 1-3 in wildcat strikes at 70 companies in at least eight states from central to northern Mexico, virtually paralyzing the mining industry.

The strike resulted from an attempt by the government to remove the Mexican Miners Union's top officer, General Secretary Napoleón Gómez Urrutia, and replace him with Elías Morales Hernández, a union dissident who is reportedly backed by the Grupo Mexico mining company.

As Mexico labor expert Dan La Botz explains:

“The strike by members of the National Union of Mining and Metallurgical Workers of Mexico (SNTMMRM) resulted from both labor union and political causes. The explosion and cave in at the Pasta de Conchos mine in San Juan de Las Sabinas, Coahuila in northern Mexico on February 19 killed 65 miners. The Miners Union leader Gómez Urrutia blamed the employer, Grupo Mexico, calling the deaths “industrial homicide.” The Pasta de Conchos cave-in set off a storm. Throughout Mexico politicians, academics, intellectuals, and ordinary people criticized the mining company.....

“While miners throughout the country mourned the death of their brothers and complained of health and safety conditions in their own mines, there was no official or wildcat strike in the immediate aftermath of the accident.

“Then, on February 28 the Mexican Secretary of Labor announced that Gómez Urrutia was not actually the head of the union, but that the real general secretary was Elías Morales Hernández. The government's action was based on part of Mexican labor law known as “taking note” (toma de nota), under which the government recognizes the legally elected officers of labor unions.” [1]

The government turned to violent repression of the striking miners and steelworkers supporting them. On April 20 eight hundred state and federal police launched an assault on 500 striking workers who had been occupying a steel mill in Lázaro Cárdenas. Two were killed, five seriously injured and 40 wounded.

Since Felipe Calderón declared himself winner of the presidential elections Grupo Mexico has been on the offensive against the miners. At Nacozari, one of the world's largest copper mines, just a few miles south of the US border, 1400 miners have been on strike since March 24. On July 12 the board said they'd abandoned their jobs, and gave the mine's owner, Grupo Mexico, permission to close down operations, effectively firing the strikers. At the time of writing the strike is unresolved.

Bloody conflict in Atenco

San Salvador Atenco, 30 kms west of Mexico City, is a largely agricultural community which in 2001 led a huge and successful battle against the building of a new Mexico City airport, which would have confiscated their land and destroyed their livelihoods. The organisation which led the struggle, the FPDT (Peoples' Front in Defense of Land), remained in existence.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/atnconew13.jpg>]

Atenco stand-off

This militant community invited Subcommandante Marcos to speak in the town on May 1. Two days later police attempted to arrest flower sellers from Atenco who set up their stalls on some land owned by the American

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multinational Walmart in the nearby community of Texcoco. The flower sellers called for help on their mobile phones and hundreds arrived to beat back the police attack. A day of bloody battles followed, in which two people were killed by paramilitary riot police.

Next morning the federal riot police carried out a brutal attack on the town, which involved - as is the style in Mexico - brutal beatings, the wrecking of homes, the theft of money and the arrest of more than one hundred. In jail dozens were subject to torture and more than 20 women were raped or otherwise sexually abused. Some key leaders of the community, including FPDT leaders Ignacio del Valle and Felipe Alvarez, remain in jail accused of 'armed kidnap' (a reference to the abduction of several cops during the first day of the battle).

The Atenco attack caused outrage in Mexico and beyond because television reporters were allowed to film many of the events, including the beating of one man by more than 20 riot cops. As a consequence of the Atenco attack the Zapatista leadership declared a red alert and started a nationwide campaign for the release of the imprisoned Atenco campesinos.

In a statement on 4 May, the Revolutionary Workers Party who support the Fourth International, declared the events at Atenco to be "a deliberate provocation against the Other Campaign" saying that "without a shadow of doubt" the police attacks has been designed to coincide with Marcos' visit, and to impede the progress of his campaign. After finishing the Valley of Mexico part of his trip Marcos was due to travel to San Luis Potosí, where an important rally for the release of political prisoners was due to take place.

Uprising and terror in Oaxaca

Oaxaca state on the Pacific coast has a long militant history. In the early 1970s it was the site of a militant guerrilla struggle led by the Party of the Poor, which resulted in near-genocidal repression in which thousands of young people assumed to support the guerrilla were killed.

Over the summer there has been a prolonged struggle against the ultra-corrupt state government of right-wing Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, a member of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party, until recently the main party of the Mexican elite). It started with a strike by militant teachers for better wages and more financial support for poor students, by soon mushroomed into a general campaign to force Ulises Ruiz to quit.

The teachers and their allies occupied the main square (Zócalo) in the city of Oaxaca, including taking over some government buildings. On June 14 state and federal paramilitary police launched a violent attack on the protestor's encampment in which several people (the exact number is unknown) were killed. The very next day the teachers and their supporters re-took the Zócalo, instituting a two-month period of virtual 'dual power' in the city and much of the state. Indeed on July 5 the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (known by its Spanish initials APPO) declared itself to be the legitimate government of the state.

Since then there have been repeated mass marches, assassinations of popular leaders by 'unknown' gunmen who have opened fire on several demonstrations, the takeover of several radio and television stations to put the mass media at the service of the people, police attacks on those radio stations and at the time of writing (late August) a threat by Oaxaca business people to stage a state-wide strike against...the inability of the state government to stop all the strikes!

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/riot_police.jpg]

Riot police wait in front of Oaxaca cathedral. Photo: Netherlands Indymedia

In response to their inability to crush the mass movement politically, Ulises Ruiz - backed by Vicente Fox's national

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government - has unleashed a reign of terror in the streets of Oaxaca. Right-wing death squads prowl the city by night and have carried out drive-by shootings at the radio and television stations, as well as opening fire on several demonstrations.

On 21 August the Channel 9 television station headquarters, used as a headquarters by the dissident movement, was attacked and burned by right-wing thugs, making it unusable.

On 22 August city and state police agents, dressed in black and wearing masks, traveled throughout the city in a caravan of motorcycles and pick-up trucks. The convoy of 34 vehicles joined up at about twenty minutes after midnight and opened fire on TV and radio security watchposts from their moving vehicles. As the caravan passed radio station La Ley 710, teacher Lorenzo San Pablo Cervantes received bullet wounds to the back. He was taken to the hospital and later died.

In Oaxaca, as elsewhere, right-wing government forces are trying to effectively militarise the struggle, create an atmosphere of fear and tension, create mass feeling of crisis and disorder and blame all this on the rebellion - to create the atmosphere for a future bloody crushing of the movement by the army or police.

The situation is now extremely dangerous for the mass movement, especially as tactical divisions have emerged, with the teachers abandoning their 44-day strike without having achieved their objectives. The fate of the Oaxaca struggle is closely linked with that against electoral fraud centred on the occupation of central Mexico City.

Electoral Fraud

In the run-up to the July 2 presidential election the two leading candidates, Felipe Calderón of the PAN and Manuel Lopez Obrador of the PRD appeared to be neck and neck, but with some polls putting Lopez Obrador slightly ahead. In the event, when the final result was posted, the official result gave a slight advantage to Calderón, leading to widespread suspicions of electoral fraud.

As Mexico City journalist and left-wing activist Peter Gellert points out:

“Given the close vote and AMLO's (Lopez Obrador's) charges of electoral fraud, a partial recount of 9% of the country's 131,000 polling stations was ordered by the Federal Electoral Tribunal. AMLO and his supporters, however, have been demanding a 100% recount. The recount, which began on August 9, has not resolved the dispute. The AMLO forces charge serious discrepancies, even on the basis of the small 9% sample, among them:

– In 43% of the sample, Calderón had been accredited with more votes than he actually received, lowering his total number of votes by 13,500. This was 5000% more votes than AMLO lost in the recount.

– In 65% of the recounted polling stations, there were either more ballots deposited than there were voters or more voters than there were corresponding ballots. In Mexico, control of the paper ballots is extremely strict. In the 9% of the polling stations that were recounted, these discrepancies involved 120,000 ballots - half the difference between the two candidates nationwide across all the polling stations.

– More than 30% of the supposedly sealed ballot boxes had been opened after the elections, raising the spectre that their contents were altered.” [\[2\]](#)

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Since July 30 the centre of Mexico city, including the Zócalo, has been occupied by tens of thousands of protestors. According to Gellert:

"Many far left and social organisations that didn't participate in AMLO's campaign are involved in the anti-fraud protests. Along the eight kilometre stretch of encampments, a wide array of neighbourhood associations, unions, student groups and political organisations can be found.

"Unfortunately, the Other Campaign, an initiative launched by the Zapatista National Liberation Army and headed by the charismatic Subcommandante Marcos, while condemning the fraud, has abstained from the mass demonstrations. During the election campaign, the Other Campaign centred most of its fire on AMLO and the obvious deficiencies in the PRD's program and methods. Some organisations that participated in the Other Campaign are, however, involved in the anti-fraud protests."

The huge political crisis in Mexico is deeply rooted in the massive social inequality that has been deepened by nearly two-decades of neoliberalism and intensified subordination of Mexico to the needs of US multinationals and agri-business. Violent repression, harsh methods of struggle and occasional outbursts of fury on those at the bottom of the pile are the inevitable results.

Regrettably what the poor and oppressed of Mexico lack is a nationally structured anti-capitalist political party which can represent them, co-ordinate the struggles and intervene on the national political terrain. As we noted above, the Zapatistas and the Other Campaign can to a certain extent play the role of a substitute leadership, but only partially, occasionally and inadequately. While the far left in Mexico has been correct to support the Other Campaign, the key question is what lasting political results it will lead to.

[1] [Mexican miners and steelworkers on strike](#) - International Viewpoint May 2006

[2] Green Left Weekly August 30 2006