

Battling the Scourge of IMF “Economic Medicine”: Courage and Resistance in Oaxaca and Mexico City

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It began on May 15 this year when teachers belonging to the 70,000 strong National Union of Education Workers in Oaxaca, Mexico took to the streets for the first time to press their demands to the state government to address their long-neglected needs. They included restructuring teachers' salaries, improving the deplorable educational infrastructure forcing teachers to conduct classes in laminated cardboard shacks, a lack of books and other educational materials and providing food for the many impoverished children who come to school each day hungry.

After Chiapas, Oaxaca is the poorest of Mexico's 31 states, each of which has its own constitution and elected governor and representatives to the state congresses. Both states share a common border in the extreme south of the country, and both are predominantly rural which exacerbates the impoverishment of their people. That poverty level worsened substantially in the 1980s and especially in last dozen years because of the neoliberal so-called “free market” policies adopted by President Carlos Salinas and maintained by successive presidents up to the present that included the destructive NAFTA trade agreement with the US and Canada. It followed from the IMF-imposed structural adjustment policies since the mid-1980s that included large-scale privatizations of state-owned industries, economic deregulation, and mandated wage restraint that held pay increases to levels far below the rate of inflation. The result is that the great majority of Mexicans for years have seen their standard of living decline, and more of them now live in poverty especially in the rural areas where farmers are unable to compete with heavily subsidized US grain and other food imports flooding the country since the NAFTA agreement ended agricultural import tariffs. It's the main reason so many of them and other impoverished Mexicans come el norte in desperation to find work unavailable to them at home.

Mexico's adherence to neoliberal Washington Consensus policies also added to the country's growing dependency on capital inflows that includes “hot money” free to enter and leave the country's deregulated financial markets. It led to an unsustainable current account deficit and collapse of the peso in early 1995 causing the worst depression in the country in 60 years and far greater impoverishment of the majority of the Mexican people. Those conditions still affect most Mexicans, they're not getting better, and there's a growing discontent and anger because of them. It's leading to acts of resistance and rebellion against a system of governance that's enriched a small minority of the country's elite (a handful of them to obscene levels of wealth) at the expense of the majority poor sinking deeper into poverty and the misery from it. It's playing out now in the mass-demonstrations in Mexico City's vast Zocalo Plaza de la Constitucion (where the country's first constitution was proclaimed in 1813) in the wake of another stolen presidential election and in the streets of Oaxaca where teachers, other working people, and many organizations and

groups in solidarity with them are encamped and demonstrating daily for the rights they deserve. It shows that ordinary people anywhere will only put up with so much for so long before demanding change. In the Mexican streets today, it just remains to be seen how far these acts of resistance will go and what successes, if any, they'll have.

The Spirit of Resistance in Oaxaca

Back in May, demonstrating teachers presented their reasonable demands to Oaxaca's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz (known as URO) who rejected them out of hand. A week later on May 22 the teachers went on strike and set up a tent city in an area covering 34 city blocks in the colonial downtown area. This was the 26th consecutive year Oaxaca teachers had demonstrated demanding redress for their grievances. In the other years, the teacher action lasted a few weeks, a modest compromise was eventually reached, and things returned to normal even without satisfactorily resolving fundamental problems that always remained. Not this time, however, as events have played out. Negotiations began but after nearly three weeks produced nothing. The teachers rejected Governor Ruiz Ortiz's claim that he had no resources to meet their demands. In response, they blocked government offices, city streets and highways, tollbooths, access to the airport, caused the cancellation of the Guelanguetza cultural festival, and brought the important tourist industry to its knees causing over 1000 hotel workers to be laid off. They also held marches obstructing traffic through the downtown area and blocked construction projects on the Cerro de Fortin that overlooks the highway entering Oaxaca from Mexico City. The frustration is clearly showing among Oaxaca's merchants, restaurateurs, and hotel keepers who've announced a one-day strike on September 1 in protest and to demand the government end the strike that's cost them millions of dollars and closed down the city's lifeblood tourist industry.

Back on June 2, things began to intensify as thousands of other working people and representatives from Oaxacan organizations joined in solidarity with the teachers to march against the state government and Governor Ruiz Ortiz. They repeated it again on June 7 in another huge peaceful march numbering about 120,000 in which student and parents' groups, other union members, and representatives from socialist and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from Oaxaca and other states joined with the teachers to help them press their demands. So far everything was peaceful, as in the past, but all that changed on June 14 when state police entered the compound where the teachers were camping. They had riot shields, fired tear gas at the people there, and were aided by an overhead police helicopter that also dropped tear gas canisters on the crowds that by now were raging. The police also destroyed or burned nearly all the encampment shelters and disabled Radio Planton that had been broadcasting information to the people from the main square since the demonstration began.

The teachers took none of this lightly and fought back as best they could including tearing up cobblestones to throw at the police and setting police cars afire. After some hours they managed to regain the upper hand, but from this action a precedent had been broken of short-lived peaceful actions each year followed by government obstinacy and in the end a modest compromise. For the first time ever, this strike action became militant, and it showed two days later on June 16 when an astonishing 300,000 - 500,000 people marched again (in a greater area of 1 million people) outraged at how they were treated and demanding the immediate resignation of Governor Ruiz Ortiz who again ignored them. It was clear this was becoming more than just another strike for better pay and working conditions. It had grown to much more than that to include Mexico's long history of

authoritarian rule for and by the rich and powerful with little attention given to addressing people needs.

A clear show of common determination and defiance of state authority then happened early in July when the teachers, other unions, indigenous peoples, religious groups, NGOs and others from all across Oaxaca state bonded together to form the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO) declaring this to be a citizens' assembly taking over as the governing body of the state. APPO set up encampments outside all state government buildings including the legislature and governor's offices closing them all.

So far though, there's no resolution in sight to the confrontation and no clear idea whether there will be one soon or what it will be when the current strife eventually ends. It's now been ongoing for over three months, has erupted in violence leaving two people dead and has gone well beyond the demands of the teachers who began it hoping, as in other years, for a peaceful solution. It wasn't to be and now it's closed off highways and the schools, crippled the state's tourist industry, caused physical damage in the city, and polarized the people en masse against the Oaxacan government. The teachers and other demonstrators showed it by seizing government offices forcing the governor and officials to work out of hotels and then other makeshift facilities when demonstrators warned hotel managers they would peacefully take over the ones allowing state officials to hold sessions there.

The governor is now under enormous pressure with the people demanding he resign immediately. In desperation he's apparently disappeared, and his whereabouts remain secret. Unless in hiding he orders the state authorities go all out in violent confrontation, APPO representing the working people of Oaxaca is now the functioning authority in the state. It remains to be seen if it intends to hold on to it and can do it. For now though, the confrontation continues and it's getting even uglier. On August 21 at 3:00 AM, four vans of armed men (apparently police and hired paramilitary thugs) attacked the people guarding the antenna of Channel 9 and radio 96.9 with high powered weapons resulting in several people being wounded and one killed. In retaliation, the demonstrators took control of 10 AM and FM radio stations and are using them to inform the people what's happening on the streets. Other attacks also have been occurring most nights elsewhere in the city with people shot at or disappeared again apparently by the state police and hired paramilitaries. So far the Oaxacan people are resolute and determined to see this through to the end and to do it nonviolently. They have the numbers on their side, and up to now the Federal government has been reluctant to intervene because of the mass peaceful resistance movement in the Mexico City streets and elsewhere calling for a just resolution of the fraudulent July 2 presidential election vote count so far unaddressed.

The Struggle for Electoral Justice On the Streets of Mexico City

If the people of Oaxaca stand firm and succeed in effectively running their state and getting redress for their demands which are quite reasonable, it will add momentum to the national campaign in the wake of the fraudulent Mexican presidential election now playing out simultaneously in Mexico City's vast Zocalo public square and elsewhere around the country. For weeks, Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) candidate Lopez Obrador (known affectionately as ALMO) and his supporters have maintained a 12 mile encampment in downtown Mexico City and effectively kept the city in gridlock. They've symbolically closed government offices, shut down whole sections of streets across the city for miles, taken over toll booths, for a time blocked Mexico's Stock Exchange, and held mass marches

through the streets with as many as a record 2 million turnout at one of them to support their candidate. They demand a full and honest vote recount of the July 2 presidential election results that had clear rampant fraud and irregularities unsatisfactorily addressed. Unless they are, Obrador promised his supporters his campaign for an honest recount of all precincts “vote by vote, precinct by precinct” will continue indefinitely in the courts and on the streets where like in Oaxaca civil resistance will be used if their reasonable demands by peaceful protests are ignored which so far they have been.

At this point, there’s no way to know for sure how the battle for electoral justice will be settled, but several key dates are approaching fast. The issue of resolving the election’s official winner is in the hands of the Federal Election Tribunal (or Trife...pronounced Treefay). It has until August 31 to officially complete its final count and up to September 6 either to declare a winner, annul up to 20% of the precincts without annulling the entire election, or annul the whole thing which by law would mean the Congress would choose an interim president and have a new election within two years. A second key date is September 1 when current President Vincente Fox must give his annual State of the Union address. Lopez Obrador has said if the Trife declares National Action Party (PAN) candidate Felipe Calderon the winner, he and his supporters will protest in mass “civil resistance” at the halls of Congress on that date.

Two other fast-approaching dates must also be watched - Mexico’s national Independence Day on September 15 and the following day when traditionally a military parade is scheduled through the historic center of the city. On September 15, the president always comes to the balcony of the Palacio Nacional on one side of the square, rings the ceremonial bell and leads the “cry of pain” from the Zocalo. Lopez Obrador promises if Calderon is declared the winner he and his supporters will replace Vincente Fox with their own cry of pain and disrupt the traditional commemoration then and again the following day of the parade.

How this will be resolved is now in the hands of the seven Trife judges who on August 28 unanimously dismissed allegations of massive fraud and are almost certain to declare Felipe Calderon the winner and new Mexican president. It’s final decision cannot be appealed. Lopez Obrador responded calling the ruling “offensive and unacceptable for millions of Mexicans.” He told his assembled followers in the Zocalo this court decision “represents not only a disgrace in the history of our country but also a violation of the constitutional order and a true coup d’etat.” He also called his opponent a “usurper” and added “the constitutional order is broken.....and the electoral tribunal decided to validate the fraud against the citizens’ will and decided to back the criminals who robbed us of the presidential election.” He went on to say Mexico “needs a revolution” and vowed to name himself president when the Trife’s official ruling is announced.

There’s no way to know for sure what will happen next, but this may be a watershed moment in Mexico’s history. The long-entrenched institutions of power in the country are being challenged as never before. Since the Trife, as most expected, failed to address the overwhelming fraud and election theft, there likely will be civil resistance in the streets in opposition that potentially could become a mass uprising over the coming weeks. If this happens, it could threaten to unseat the federal authorities in the capitol and lead to mass violence and bloodshed as they attempt to restore order. With that in mind, it’s been rumored that a contingent of US Special Forces has been sent to help the Mexican military guard the country’s oil fields in case of trouble. Mexico’s Pemex state oil company produces about 3 million barrels of oil a day and ships about half of it to the US, thus making Mexico

one of this country's leading oil suppliers.

It's also gone unreported that the Congress in Mexico City is surrounded by 6 and one-half foot high gridded metal barriers. Behind them are 3,000 special shock troops who are Federal Preventive Police (PFP), a force drawn from the Mexican Army and members of the elite Estado Mayor or Presidential military command. They form a Praetorian Guard line of defense armed with tear gas launchers, water cannons and light tanks assigned to protect the institutions of power against a rebellion that might threaten to storm the legislative Chamber of Deputies, Senate or the Palacio Nacional (the National Palace seat of the federal executive in Mexico).

Given the constant mass demonstrations in the Mexico City streets, this force is certain to be on high alert, can easily be reinforced if needed, and is now ready to act if civil resistance turns to disobedience or rebellion in the aftermath of the final Trife ruling that now looks to be a mere formality. Blood in the streets is nothing new to Mexico, and it may be seen there again as tensions now are very high and not likely to subside soon. Lopez Obrador said if the Trife formally declares Felipe Calderon the election winner he will lead a civil resistance movement in opposition and do it by setting up some kind of parallel government. If he follows through and keeps his word, the battle lines will be clearly drawn in a struggle ahead that likely will be turbulent, protracted and uncertain as to how it will end.

Another potential source of trouble is the still unsettled matter of 30 political prisoners arrested on May 3 and 4 in San Salvador Atenco. Addressing that issue quietly and much more is Zapatista (EZLN) leader Subcomandante Marcos. He and many thousands of his supporters and organizations allied with him representing many thousands more in their Zapatista Other Campaign organized a national movement to end Mexico's unjust economic system of corrupted and predatory capitalism that exploits people for profit ruthlessly. His goal one day is to bring real social, economic and democratic change to the country but do it outside the political process within which he believes it can never happen.

Toward that goal, on January 1 this year, Marcos began a six month campaign taking him to all Mexico's 31 states to meet and listen to a diverse range of people, groups and organizations hoping to gain greater support for his mission and goals. The spirit of APPO and people on the streets in Oaxaca are very much a part of the Other Campaign Marcos is trying to build. What's not part of it is supporting Lopez Obrador's campaign for the presidency because Marcos wants much greater reform for Mexico than he believes Obrador would ever work for if elected or even be able to achieve through the electoral process if he wanted to. He hopes his Other Campaign can achieve it, and with a great enough organizing effort is trying to build unity among many diverse elements in the country to back him in his campaign for real change and the benefits it can bring to the great majority of the Mexican people.

With so much resistance happening on the streets of the country today that's likely to intensify after the August 28 Trife announcement, Mexico may be more ripe for real change now than it's been since the heroic efforts of Emiliano Zapata Salazar helped lead a national revolutionary movement against the Porfirio Diaz dictatorship that began in 1910 and led to the dictator's overthrow the following year. Subcomandante Marcos and his modern-day Zapatistas may sense another watershed moment in Mexico's troubled history and feel now is the time to seize it and go for the change he hopes to help achieve.

For now though, it remains for events to play out in the upcoming days and weeks

throughout the country. There are strong indications that Mexican authorities sense a troubled time ahead, are armed and ready for it if it comes with likely US military support, and will have to consider how to deal with it. It's in their hands to decide whether to use violent militant action against the people demanding justice or relent and give in enough to keep things from spiraling out of control. Whatever action they take, it's possible Mexico may never be the same again, but it's still too early to know and no one should be foolish enough to guess. The best anyone can say is stay closely tuned in case Mexican history is about to be made.

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