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Mexico

# How Does a Teachers' Union Keep a Government in Check for 90 Days?

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**Mexico's teachers' strike began April 15, Teachers Day, and has kept up the momentum throughout the summer vacation. Classes are due to start Monday, August 22, and despite negotiations with the government, the teachers have not agreed to go back to the classroom, maintaining their militant tactics of blockades of major highways and railroad tracks, demonstrations, etc. Clearly, the movement's ability to continue and force the government to negotiate, when what it would prefer "and has threatened several times" is just to repress it, has to do with multiple national and international factors. But one of them is the strength and significance of the teachers' union itself in Mexico. [1]**

As revolutionary activists, we often think the only sector of society that can really challenge governments are industrial unions. When we do that, we're thinking of the long-term general ideas about point-of-production workers and neglecting to look at each social formation as it has developed historically. Obviously, in the last 40 years, we have seen the rise of many non-union movements that have challenged different aspects of bourgeois society (feminism, LGBTIQ, ecology movements), but when it comes to unions, we still tend to think only of industrial workers as central to our strategy.

In Mexico and the Fourth International, we've had this debate since the 1979 congress that oriented us to what we called then "the turn to industry." At that time, in Mexico, we said that we also had to turn to certain service unions like the teachers, not only industry, to embed ourselves in the central sectors of the working class. Although at the time it was rather controversial, I still think it was the right move.

## Why is that?

Mexico's teachers' union, the National Educational Workers' Union (SNTE) is the largest in all of Latin America (1.3 million members). In a country with approximately 16,000 registered unions "that is, enormous fragmentation" and only 7 or 8 million of the 30 million workers in the formal sector unionized, 1.3 million workers make up a big chunk. At the same time that we were talking about the turn to industry including a turn to this union, an enormous opposition movement was emerging in it, which gave rise to the National Educational Workers Coordinating Committee (CNTE), which demanded the ouster of the bureaucratic PRI-controlled leadership in office "for life" and decent working conditions and wages for teachers. Several years later, it was successful in toppling the original bureaucratic leader, who the PRI abandoned as unsustainable and replaced with another, who ended up doing exactly the same thing and is now in jail.

The CNTE has survived to this day, with a membership of from 300,000 to 400,000, and leads several big locals around the country. In many states those locals have been the prime movers for broad popular mobilizations; the case of Oaxaca in 2006, when CNTE-led Local 22 spearheaded the huge APPO popular movement for different demands, is the most noteworthy until the current movement.

But there are other reasons that this union and its democratic opposition are important in Mexico: traditionally, teachers are some of the most respected members of almost any community, neighborhood, or town "unfortunately, this is not reflected in their pay today, as evidenced by the constant struggles of the CNTE over the last 30 years.

Their relevance dates back at least to the Mexican Revolution. A rural society at that time, in Mexican towns at that time, the most important authority figures were often the priest and the local teacher, even more than elected

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officials. They were consulted on any and all matters. During the Revolution, two national groupings were particularly relevant: railroad workers and teachers; the former because they controlled the rails, vital for troop movements, and the second, because they were the ones who knew how to read and write, and often played important roles as advisors to local and regional secular and military leaders. After the Revolution, brigades of teachers went out into the countryside to carry out literacy campaigns as part of the 1930s "socialist education" drive.

The term "maestro" (professor, teacher) continues to be a mark of respect. And this respect is amplified when the teachers are bilingual and work in "and are often from" indigenous communities. This tradition has migrated with people to the cities, where education continues to be seen as the stepping stone to progress and personal social mobility.

I hope this introductory article offers a little more context about Mexico and why teachers can have the kind of effect they are having on an entire society in crisis.

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[1] see also this: [The Neoliberal Education Reform on Shaky Ground](#)