REPORT ▶ MEXICO

**Mexican teachers jailed and shot for protesting education reform**

On Sunday, June 19, Federal armed forces fired on teachers, students and supporters in Nochixtlán, a town in the southern Mexico state of Oaxaca. Nine people were killed, and many more wounded. Twenty-three were detained by the police.

Demonstrators had blocked a highway, a common form of protest in Mexico, after the federal government had arrested leaders of the teachers’ union in Oaxaca. On June 12, as Ruben Nuñez, head of Oaxaca’s teachers’ union – Section 22 of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE, English: National Union of Education Workers) – was leaving a meeting in Mexico City, his car was overtaken and stopped by several large king-cab pickup trucks. Heavily armed men in civilian clothes exited and pulled him, another teacher, and a taxi driver from their cab, and then drove them at high speed to the airport. Nuñez was immediately flown over a thousand miles north to Hermosillo, Sonora, and dumped into a high-security federal lockup.

Just hours earlier, unidentified armed agents did the same thing in Oaxaca itself, taking prisoner Francisco Villalobos, the union’s second-highest officer, and flying him to the Hermosillo prison as well. Both joined Aciel Sibaja, who had been sitting in the same penitentiary since April 14. Sibaja’s crime? Accepting dues given voluntarily by teachers across Oaxaca. Section 22 has had to collect dues in cash since last July, when state authorities froze not only the union’s bank accounts but even the personal ones of its officers. Sibaja was responsible for keeping track of the money teachers paid voluntarily, which the government called ‘funds from illicit sources’.

The three are not the only leaders in jail. Five others have been imprisoned since last October. ‘The leaders of Section 22 are hostages of the federal government’, says Luis Hernández Navarro, a former teacher and now opinion editor for the Mexico City daily La Jornada. ‘Their detention is simultaneously a warning of what can happen to other teachers who continue to reject the [federal government’s] “education reform”, and a payback to force the movement to demobilise’.

The arrests are just one effort the Mexican government has made in recent months to stop implementation of the government’s education reform program. While strikes in Mexico are hotly contested, there is no precedent for firing teachers in such massive numbers just for striking.

The night of the firings, federal police attacked and removed the encampment that teachers had organised outside Mexico City’s education secretariat. On June 11, the police in Oaxaca City moved to dismantle a similar encampment in front of the state’s education office. When 500 heavily armed police advanced shooting tear gas, confrontations spilled into the surrounding streets, reminiscent of the way a similar strike in 2006 was attacked, and then mushroomed into an insurrection that lasted for months.

One controversial provision of the federal government’s education reform requires teachers to take tests to evaluate their qualifications. Those not making good marks are subject to firing. This year, when the government tried to begin testing, teachers struck in protest.

In March, when Nuñez tried to give awards to ‘distinguished and excellent teachers’, one of them, Lucero Navarette, a primary-school teacher in Chihuahua, told him, ‘The results can depend on many factors and the personal circumstances each one of us live through…many don’t get the result they deserve, because the job they actually do at school is very different from what comes out in the test’. Journalist Hernández Navarro says educators have a tradition of egalitarianism and mutual support, and believe that ‘there are no first- or second- or third-class teachers. Only teachers’.

On March 22 Nuñez also announced a measure that would spell the end to Mexico’s national system of teacher training schools, called the ‘normals’. Instead of having to graduate from a normal, he said, anyone with a college degree in any subject could be hired to teach. Since the Mexican Revolution and before, the normals have been the vehicle for children from poor families in the countryside, and from the families of teachers themselves, to become trained educators. Returning to rural and working-class communities, teachers then often play an important role in developing movements for social justice. The normal schools themselves have historically been hotbeds of social protest and movements challenging the government.

Guerrero’s normal school in Ayotzinapa was the target two years ago of an attack that led to the disappearance and possible murder of 43 students, which has since galvanised Mexico. Recently a commission of international experts criticised the Mexican government for refusing to cooperate in efforts to identify the fate of the students, and pointed to the possible involvement of officials at very high levels in their disappearance.
Firing teachers and disbanding the normals is a not-so-hidden goal of the federal education reform. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has called for abolishing the normal schools, and urged President Enrique Peña Nieto to fire teachers who get bad test results and exclude them from teaching. Similar measures have been advocated by a Washington think tank, the Partnership for Educational Revitalisation in the Americas, a project of the Inter-American Dialogue with funding from USAID.

Both organisations work in cooperation with the corporate Mexican education reform lobby, Mexicanos Primero, headed Claudio González Guajardo, a member of one of the country’s wealthiest families. González instructed Peña Nieto that ‘Mexicans elected you, not the [teachers] union’, and told him to ‘end the power of the union over hiring, promotion, pay, and benefits for teachers’.

Oaxaca has become a target because Sección 22 proposed its own alternative education reform over six years ago, which concentrated on respecting indigenous culture and forging alliances between teachers, students, parents, and their communities. After the insurrection of 2006, the union became the backbone of the left’s effort to defeat the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, English: Institutional Revolutionary Party), and in 2010 Oaxacans for the first time elected a non-PRI governor, Gabino Cue. Owing his election to the teachers, Cue agreed to begin implementing their reform instead of the federal one.

In 2012, however, the PRI regained control of the federal government. Under its pressure, Cue reneged on his commitment to Oaxaca’s teachers and announced that he would implement the federal reforms instead. Protest started immediately, and have escalated since then. With the left in Oaxaca badly divided, the PRI regained control of the state government as well in voting on June 6. The arrests of the two top leaders of Sección 22 followed in less than a week.

Since the 1970s, when over 100 teachers were murdered during the years when La Coordinadora was organised, the CNTE has won control of the union in Oaxaca, Guerrero, Chiapas and Michoacán, and it has a strong presence in several other states. Nationally, it has become an important base of the Mexican left. It is one of the most powerful opponents of the government’s embrace of free market and free trade policies. Weakening the union and the role of teachers in politics is therefore an important political goal for González and Mexico’s corporate elite, as well as the national political parties moving the country to the right.

On June 11, President Peña Nieto announced that he would only talk with the teachers if they agreed to two conditions. The Government of the Republic repeats that it is open to dialogue only when they comply with two conditions: returning to work in the schools of Chiapas, Guerrero, Michoacán, and Oaxaca, and accepting the Education Reform.

After the enormous public outcry that followed the shootings in Nochixtlan, however, the government agreed to negotiate without those pre-conditions, although it continues to say it will not modify its education reform program. And on July 16 two of the imprisoned teachers were released - Aciel Sibaja, Othon Nazariega Segura and Roberto Abel Jimenez. The release of Ruben Nuñez was also expected, as he is accused of the same charges as the others. Meanwhile, demonstrations against the federal education reform have spread to every part of Mexico.

Note

1. For more on the alternative reform proposals and the corporate sector’s attacks on teachers, see ‘US-Style School Reform Goes South’: http://www.thenation.com/article/us-style-school-reform-goes-south/?nc=1

Over 60 million jobs have been lost since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008. With the addition of new labour market entrants over the next five years, 280 million more jobs need to be created by 2019. Half the world’s workforce are employed in precarious work and one in three jobs pay less than $1.25 per day. To just maintain the status quo 1.8 billion jobs must be created by 2030.

We are seeing levels of inequality in income distribution back to the scale of the 1920s. We are living through a boom period but only for the one percent.

There is a word missing in the world of tomorrow debate – ‘solidarity’. UNI Global Union and its 20 million members stands for solidarity in action.