

## Mexico: The War on Teaching

By Leonel Mejía

Education is the cornerstone of any society. Unfortunately, a large majority of the 35 nations in the Americas face issues that require significant changes in their education system. Mexico is one of these nations, but even by comparison with other Latin American countries its public education system is in deplorable condition; according to a report from the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), Mexico is last in educational achievement, exceeded only by Haiti.

The Mexican government's underfunding of public schools has caused damage to Mexican society. It is clear that corruption, violence, murder, addiction, and poverty are the result of poor investment in education. The neglect of public education for many years has been a disaster for Mexico.

A contributing factor is Mexico's huge problem: its neighbor to the north. The Mexican economy spiraled downward with the introduction of NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement, a trilateral trade agreement between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, in effect since 1994) causing disruption throughout Mexico. The neoliberal policies of NAFTA created the displacement of 30 million Mexicans, most of whom went to the U.S. in search of employment (an estimated 18 million of these are undocumented). Within Mexico, the use of child labor increased, keeping children out of school.

U.S. intervention in the internal affairs of Mexico is not new, but what is new is the model to do so in Mexico. The Merida Initiative,<sup>(1)</sup> a joint Mexican-U.S. project, has spent \$2.5 billion to fight the so-called "War on Drugs" in Mexico, analogous to the earlier decades of war on "Communism" in other Latin American countries. A familiar comment about the narco-inspired war is: "Mexico supplies the body. The U.S. supplies the bullets." [A January 2016 Government Accountability Office report revealed that 70 percent of firearms seized by Mexican authorities between 2009 and 2014 came from the U.S. And, in spite of concerns over human rights violations, the Department of Defense was increasing its training and equipment to Mexico, according to the Congressional Research Report of February 2016.] Mexican militarization is real and, rather than improving conditions for the people, has resulted in the torture, executions, and deaths of many, many thousands of Mexicans. Members of the Mexican army and police force, as well as government officials, have been implicated in drug crime, and corruption appears to be systemic. Government entities are accused of involvement in the 2014 disappearance of 43 student teachers who had nothing to do with drug cartels, in Ayotzinapa in the state of Guerrero.

Another major factor in Mexico's troubles is that since the implementation of NAFTA, the country has experienced the privatization of state-owned commons such as electricity, trains, roads, oil, and banks. Now neoliberalism is rubbing its profit-hungry hands wanting to privatize education.

It is clear that in Mexico public education needs reform, but this reform must be negotiated and debated by teachers, parents, and students—the three main groups that define what education is about. The Mexican Congress had already passed a bill to reform education—the infamous education reform of 2012. It was not supported by the majority of the population, and was never discussed and approved by teachers, parents, and students. It was only negotiated between Mexican politicians and the Spanish National Union of Education Workers (acronym in Spanish: SNTE).

Education is a constitutional right and, according to the Third Article of the Mexican Constitution, each child must be provided a free, secular, and mandatory education, but that is something that has not been enforced. Unfortunately, education has not been free, secular, nor mandatory. Some children are provided with classes only a few days during the week, others do not have classes for months. Many rural areas and small towns do not even possess actual, physical school buildings [“bricks and mortar”], furniture, or school lunches. Mexico's education reform does not address the absence of infrastructure to support education in the countryside. In many cases, there are no teachers or schools at all. Most of the problem is in the Southern states of Mexico—Oaxaca, Guerrero, Michoacán, Chiapas, and Tabasco—where, although these states hold 80 percent of Mexico's wealth, the people are the poorest. A population rich in resources (mainly oil and gas, but also some metallic and nonmetallic minerals) should not have to suffer with the issues it is facing now. Lack of support for education is not the students' fault—nor is it the fault of teachers dedicated to education who are compelled to be out of the classroom to protest.

To understand why teachers need to protest, it is necessary to understand Mexico's education unions. In Mexico, the government has always tried to control the education unions, which explains why education has been heading the way it is. There are now two major unions—one is called the National Union of Education Workers (Spanish acronym: SNTE), and the other is called the National Coordinator of Education Workers (acronym in Spanish: CNTE). SNTE is allied with the Mexican government and has always been a key player in manipulating education for the purpose of political power. On the other hand, the CNTE represents the people's resistance. It opposes the government's plan to privatize education, and to destroy teachers' jobs and organized labor. CNTE has never given up on the goal of helping students obtain better education.

The Mexican government's response to the educators resisting its plans has been brutal—repression, imprisonment, and death. An example came in June 19 of this year when CNTE teachers in Baja California Norte, Coahuila, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Michoacán participated in a national movement, deciding to strike until the government agreed to their demand for open dialogue about changing the education

reform act passed by the Mexican Congress in 2012. In La Asunción Nochixtlán, in the state of Oaxaca, resisting teachers and their supporters were attacked by Mexican Federal Police. Nine were shot dead, 25 were arrested, and more than 100 injured.

But the Mexican government underestimated the power of social media because during the repression against the teachers in Oaxaca many sources were broadcasting live, causing an outcry from the majority of the Mexican people and the international community. Today the teachers and government are negotiating a better reform, but there is skepticism about whether Mexican authorities mean to reach a solution through negotiating. That's because the Mexican government continues to intimidate the leaders of the CNTE. Allied with the government, the SNTE declared that it was ok with the way the government has responded to the CNTE protest in Oaxaca. Nevertheless, June 19 is a date in Mexican history that will be remembered as the day when teachers, parents, and students started to say, "Enough is enough" and "Bullets will never teach curriculum in Mexico".

Mexicans abroad demand the resignation of Secretary of Education Aurelio Nuño, Oaxaca Governor Gabino Cué, and Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto for their responsibility in the killing of the protesters in Nochixtlán, Oaxaca. As Lucio Cabañas Barrientos, a teacher and resistor from Ayotzinapa Normal Rural School, said: "To protest is a right, to repress is a crime."

And, in the U.S., taxpayers need to understand what their government is doing and spending in Mexico in the name of national security. The American people should hold its government accountable for its actions that harm Mexico.

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#### Endnotes

1. Since attracting global attention and garnering condemnation relating to human rights violations, the Merida Initiative is repositioning its stated objections as strengthening societal institutions, dealing with justice, surveillance, and border "security".

## References and Additional Information

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