

Mexican government launches bloody assault on Oaxaca protesters

By Rafael Azul
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Thousands of federal riot police invaded Oaxaca on Sunday to crush an oppositional movement that has held control of the southern Mexican state for several months. The significance of this police operation goes beyond the Oaxaca protests, which have been driven by growing poverty and inequality. It is a warning to the nation's working class that Mexico's ruling elite is willing resort to naked violence and repression. The defense of the Oaxacan protesters requires the mobilization of working people throughout Mexico.

The assault began at 8 a.m. on Sunday when 4,536 Federal Preventive Police (PFP) officers and 120 Federal Investigations Agency (AFI) agents entered the state. The force was equipped with 14 armored vehicles capable of shooting water under pressure as well as pepper and teargas, and six helicopters. The police took the state's capital city, Oaxaca, 13 hours after the assault began, leaving three dead and scores injured.

A teargas projectile crushed the chest of José Alberto Lopez Bernal, a nurse, killing him. Fidel Garcia, a student, died of a bullet wound. A third casualty, a teacher, has not been identified.

Officially, 40 to 50 arrests were made. However, there are reports of people having disappeared and being unaccounted for, including 160 from the town of Nochixtalan who were taken off a bus on Monday morning and have not been heard from since.

Supporters of the Popular Assembly of Oaxacan Peoples (APPO) resisted the assault. APPO was formed in the wake of brutal attacks on striking teachers last June 14. On that day, state police assaulted and burned down an encampment of teachers, killing two and injuring many others.

Popular anger in Oaxaca has also been fueled by years of corrupt government by Governor Ulises Ruiz of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI),

compounded by the paralysis of government reconstruction agencies one year after Hurricane Stan destroyed much of the state's infrastructure. Other factors are the siphoning of water resources from Indian communities to the tourist industry and the collapse of corn prices.

The main demand of APPO and the teachers after June 14 was the removal of Governor Ruiz. Over the last two months, APPO supporters occupied government buildings to press this demand.

Two weeks ago the Mexican Senate rejected APPO's demand when senators from the conservative National Action Party (PAN) joined with their PRI counterparts to support Ruiz. At this point the administration of President Vicente Fox (PAN) began preparing the assault on Oaxaca.

Last week the local bureaucracy of the National Teachers Union (SNTE), under pressure from the national SNTE leaders, forced through a vote to end the five-month strike by the Oaxaca teachers. This opened the way for the police repression to begin.

When the police operation began, APPO radio broadcasts appealed to the population to confront the police with flowers and banners, but to avoid violence. Thousands poured into the streets, erecting barricades that slowed down the security forces.

Proceso magazine reports that the depth of opposition to the federal police took the PFP command by surprise. As the police were marching forward, hundreds risked their lives by lying down and chaining themselves in the path of the police vehicles, braving teargas and water cannon, until physically removed by the PFP officers. Helicopters spread teargas ahead of the advancing federal forces.

An on-the-spot correspondent, Julio Ponce, indicated that APPO officials are now attempting to make a list

of the arrested and disappeared and ascertain where they are being kept. APPO has received reports that the arrested have been beaten and abused in makeshift jails. Many of those arrested were transported to a nearby military base.

Several times during the assault the police contingent was forced to detour around massive barricades and residents who confronted them with a rain of stones and sticks. In two neighborhoods, Aleman and Viguera, scenes of fierce resistance, hooded PFP officers were seen systematically breaking into homes and conducting illegal searches.

Participating in the operation were paramilitary squads linked to the Institutional Revolutionary Party. Last Friday a PRI squad killed three people in Oaxaca, including Indymedia correspondent Brad Will. This was seized on by President Fox as the pretext for launching the police assault—not against the killers, but against the popular resistance. The police action has nothing to do with protecting the population against paramilitary death squads.

Fox's lame-duck administration has given contradictory signals about his support for Ruiz, intimating at times that the governor's removal would be a small price to pay to settle the crisis in Oaxaca. However, press reports indicate that President-elect Felipe Calderon, also of the PAN, favored a harder line, wishing to prevent the crisis from spilling over into his term, which begins December 1.

The PFP-AIF force entered Oaxaca's central square at 7:30 p.m. and proceeded to break up APPO's headquarters with earth-moving equipment. APPO supporters then retreated to the vicinity of the radio station from which it transmits. Neighborhood residents had congregated en masse to defend the station despite suspicious interruptions in telephone and electrical service to the area.

Over 50,000 students and workers took to the streets in Mexico City on Monday in response to the assault on Oaxaca. Among the protesters were many residents of Nezacoyotl, a working class suburb with a large population of migrants from the Mexican south. The demonstration included supporters of independent unions. With the possible exception of the electrical workers union (SUTERM), unions connected to the PRI-linked Labor Congress (CT) boycotted the protests.

While many of the protesters were rank-and-file members of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the party's leader, Lopez Obrador, refused to give support to the strike action in Oaxaca, despite APPO's appeals for his backing. The Oaxaca crisis has deeply divided the PRD, with some PRD governors supporting the Fox administration. Even while he was contesting his narrow loss in this summer's presidential election, Lopez Obrador kept largely silent on the social rebellion in Oaxaca, underscoring his own support for Mexican bourgeois institutions and the capitalist order.

While the Oaxaca schools were supposed to reopen on Monday, it appears that in some of the Indian communities parents attacked teachers who attempted to go back to work. In response to the Oaxaca repression, a dissident faction of the SNTE called the National Committee of Education Workers (CNTE) has declared an indefinite strike of teachers in the southern states of Guerrero, Michoacan and Zacatecas, as well as in Mexico City.

On Monday there appeared to be a stand-off in Oaxaca. The University Radio Station is still under APPO control. APPO has set up new barricades and moved its headquarters to Santo Domingo Square. APPO leaders are preparing to convene a congress to form a new government in Oaxaca, and organizations similar to the APPO are being created in other southern states.

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