

Mexico's 'left' and the Oaxacan teachers struggle

By Kevin Kearney
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Mexican President Felipe Calderon's provocative visit to Oaxaca last month reawakened the apparently dormant volcano of the region's militant teachers and students.

Hundreds of teachers from Oaxaca's Section 22 of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE) were attacked by police and soldiers as they attempted to protest Calderon's endorsement of subsidies for private schools on February 15. They returned a day later in their thousands demanding that Oaxaca Governor Gabino Cue dismiss several of his cabinet members, including the head of security for the state of Oaxaca, Marco Tulio López Escamilla, and the state government secretary, Irma Piñeyro Arias, who is accused of being an agent of Elba Ester Gordillo—the widely reviled national leader of the SNTE union bureaucracy and vocal supporter of president Calderon's PAN (National Action Party).

To press its demands, Section 22—representing schools responsible for 1,200,000 students in Oaxaca state—announced work stoppages on February 25 and March 8 to enable teachers to organize popular assemblies and consult with supportive members of the community.

When Section 22 challenged the last state governor, Ullyses Ruiz, in 2006, mass strikes quickly turned into a full-scale insurrection drawing large sections of student youth, workers and peasants into a popular assembly known as the "APPO" (Popular Assembly of Oaxaca), which took control of the state capital and held it for months. Nonetheless, a concerted state effort to destroy the organization and the Assembly's own political confusion—notably its lack of any coherent revolutionary leadership or perspective—led to its eventual dispersal and the frame-up arrests of its leaders, including Flavio Sosa on charges of kidnapping.

Section 22's reawakening in Oaxaca this month takes place in a new political context in which Mexico's nominally left PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution)—once associated with the mass opposition to the presidency of Felipe Calderon in 2006—has become something of a Trojan horse, enabling the PAN to infiltrate

state governorships with the aim of bolstering its position in the run-up to the 2012 presidential election.

The PRD's critical support for a weakened PAN—the right-wing party most closely identified with US imperialism and corporate interests in Mexico—has severely eroded the left, reformist image the PRD once cultivated for itself, peaking with Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's (AMLO) disputed bid for the presidency in 2006.

Section 22's mistrust of Oaxaca State Governor Gabino Cue's affiliation with Calderon and the trade union bureaucracy of Elba Gordillo is well-founded. Cue ran and was elected on a PRD-PAN ticket that has been described as an "unholy," or at least unexpected, alliance of Mexico's premiere "right" and "left" parties. While the speed with which it has shed its left populist image is somewhat accelerated, the PRD's corrupt bourgeois character was evident from its very origins in the discredited PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). The PRD's decidedly rightward political trajectory became clear to all as early as 2008, when the party disintegrated into rival camps over a disputed election for national secretary.

The 2008 split in the PRD saw the ascendancy of the NL (New Left) faction led by Jesus Ortega, which promoted an abandonment of the populist approach of the AMLO presidential campaign in favor of an orientation to identity politics and lifestyle-based "leftism," coupled with an effort to find compromise with Calderon and the PAN. Opposing this faction was the UL (United Left) or "Encinistas," whose candidate, Alejandro Encinas, ran as a proxy for the orientation and methods of Andres Manuel López Obrador and the old guard of the PRD. This entailed populist demagoguery, nationalism and hollow anti-imperialist rhetoric as the preferred means of keeping Mexico's radicalized workers and the poor under the domination of the Mexican bourgeoisie.

Although the dispute over the outcome of this internal election was never resolved, Jesus Ortega—then and current national secretary of the PRD—and his "New Left" emerged as the dominant force in the party, leaving AMLO and

Encinas weakened and increasingly isolated to their Mexico City political base.

Since July 2010, Jesus Ortega has spearheaded successful efforts to unite the PRD and the PAN in state elections against the PRI. This has temporarily reinvigorated AMLO and his ever-shrinking camp in the PRD.

Emboldened by the public confirmation of the PRD leadership's orientation to Calderon and the PAN, AMLO has repeatedly denounced his party for brokering PRD-PAN alliances in several state elections. However, this alliance has led to localized electoral gains for the PRD—whose political fortunes dropped precipitously after 2006—further boosting Ortega's stature in the party.

In response, AMLO recently announced his break with the party, while bizarrely asking Ortega and the PRD leadership for permission to leave. His announcement was a surprise even to his closest supporters, including the head of the United Left faction, Alejandro Encinas, who expressed his dismay via Twitter, saying AMLO's decision "would divide the left" in Mexico. Only later did Encinas reluctantly pledge to follow AMLO.

AMLO's feud with the PRD leadership is hardly of a principled character. For two years, the PRD leadership under Ortega has made overtures to Calderon and the PAN party, while AMLO has been systematically marginalized. His break with the party now appears to be based on tactical and electoral considerations.

AMLO started his career by firmly rooting himself in the PRI party apparatus in the state of Tabasco before joining the PRD—an offshoot of the PRI formed in 1989 in alliance with a number of minor radical and Stalinist parties. As Mayor of Mexico City, he ran for president in 2006 and was defeated by a controversially thin margin.

Although AMLO maintained a significant following among workers and the poor for years after his 2006 defeat drew masses into the streets of Mexico City, his failure to address any aspect of the emerging social crisis and mobilize his followers around such issues led to his faction's inevitable collapse and dispersal. Since the New Left took control of the PRD in 2008, AMLO has reacted by making several desperate and failed attempts to revive his popular backing.

In the immediate aftermath of losing control of the party to Jesus Ortega, AMLO attempted to revive his popular base with his 2008 nationalist campaign to "save Mexican oil." Together with his "broad left coalition" of ex-radical and Stalinist groups and his own stylishly militant "brigadistas," AMLO prepared his return to the people.

However, his deafening silence on the deep incursions into basic rights and public safety stemming from Calderon's horrific and open-ended drug war and the accelerated assault

on the already tenuous living conditions of millions of Mexican workers prevented his campaign from winning any mass following. To the masses of Mexico City—who have been systematically hustled out of their share of the nation's oil wealth since its nationalization in 1938 by then-president Lazaro Cardenas—AMLO's calls to enlist millions of "brigadistas" in the fight for oil rights controlled by the Mexican bourgeoisie sounded a bit like Don Quixote charging to battle with windmills.

More recently, some AMLO supporters in Mexico's Federal District have unveiled a 10-point strategic plan to build the party organization in 2011 for the coming presidential elections under yet another banner: "Movement of National Renovation" or "MORENA" (the acronym is the Spanish word for "brown"), which includes as one of its points a call to support the actions of AMLO's "legitimate government"—a pathetic reference to the long-dead controversy over the 2006 presidential race. He has announced his candidacy for the presidency in the 2012 elections, apparently without the backing of the PRD. He told Jorge Ramos in an interview for Univision that he would ally himself only with "progressive" forces.

It should be clear to every Mexican worker that AMLO has nothing to offer them but more hot air. In essence, he is nothing but an old-style PRI political boss long on left rhetoric and political stunts, while carefully avoiding any program that would threaten the interests of the Mexican ruling elite.

As the struggle of the Section 22 teachers has demonstrated, no aspect of the social crisis can be addressed seriously until workers construct their own fighting organizations independent of bourgeois parties like the PRD, politicians like AMLO and trade union bureaucrats like SNTE head Elba Gordillo. For such organizations to avoid the same tragic fate as the APPO, a new leadership must be built based upon an international socialist perspective.

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