

Mexican Teachers Struggle for Democratic Education

On 19th June 2016, Mexican police fired automatic weapons into 500-strong group of teachers and their supporters blocking the highway in the town of Nichixtlan in the southern state of Oaxaca, killing at least 13 and wounding a dozen more. *The Class struggle* strongly condemns this massacre by the Mexican government which is implementing neoliberal policies.

Those who lost their lives, mostly youth, were protesting in defence of public education that is being dismantled. The teachers are protesting for the last two months to the attempts of Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto to privatize education and impose authoritarian system of hiring and firing teachers.

On 23rd June, 200,000 doctors and nurses struck in sympathy with the teachers and against the attempts to privatize the federal social security and health systems. Students at major Mexican universities boycotted classes protesting firing on teachers and efforts to impose higher education costs on students and parents.

The education reform is specially designed to out the more experienced teachers, who are inspired by a long legacy of humanistic and critical education, which envisions teachers as community leaders. What is being replaced is a new model of OECD and World Bank neoliberal education reforms. The first step is applying standardized tests to school teachers in order to justify firing them and allotting individual school more budgeting and maintenance responsibilities (in the Indian official parlance it is the self-financing). One teacher said: “if you want an English teacher, Coca Cola might be the sponsor”. The protesting teachers criticize the reform for not consulting them before passing the law. They say the new system allow young people to become flexible unquestioning workers for big business, which in essence restructuring of labour and phases out teacher’s labour rights. The government targeted rural teacher colleges for closure. Many teachers point out to the poor conceptualization of a reform that prioritises standard testing of student and teacher with evaluation developed and administered by others outside education field; disregards the differences in student learning that are rooted in linguistic, cultural, socio-economic and geographic realities; and which ignores competing and even opposing visions of what education is.

One of the striking teachers union drafted an alternative to the federal reform which was blocked by the president from discussion in the legislature. This alternative draft would create a broad teacher evaluation system, guarantee jobs for college graduates, respects indigenous rights, take socio-economic realities in to account, safeguards against budget cuts and ban school fees. The alternative law declares that, “education is a human right and of anyone who receives it according to Constitutional Article”.

The teachers protest now spread to 11 out of 31 states. Noteworthy aspect is that it spread for the first time to capital region of Mexico City and Monterrey state. The teachers and other social movements are joining hands against the government’s neoliberal drive. The teachers are utilizing variety of methods to keep alive the issue such as leafleting, public demonstrations, highway and shopping Centre blockades, home visits, and occupation of state government buildings and seizure of radio stations to read messages.

The government responded with repression while offering negotiating table. The police, a force beefed up by the US to ostensibly fight the so-called drug war, have deployed massive arsenal of high tech surveillance and crowd suppression tools, high powered water cannons, anti-riot tanks, helicopters and drones. What the government is trying to do is buy out, co-opt and repress each of the different teachers groups.

On the other the Mexican teachers are joining hands with other social movements. They are fighting not for rise in salaries, of course for their job security, but the central issue is the neoliberal vision of promoting privatization and technocratic education at the expense of public education. This is the issue that is coming on the political agenda in many Latin American countries like Chile, Puerto Rico, as well as in North America like Quebec in Canada, protests against school closures in Washington, Philadelphia and California in USA.