



The violent heart of Mexico today

Rix Bragg Sun, 14/11/2010 - 08:40

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The war against drugs in Mexico is causing serious harm to people across the country, whilst anti trade union violence is also on the increase, writes Rix Bragg

In Mexico the current global economic crisis has brought the particular challenges and issues facing the Mexican working class into sharp focus. In addition, the pressures put upon the whole of society by the global recession, and more importantly the recession in the United States, has exacerbated many of the existing problems. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the upsurge in violence surrounding the war on drugs.

The conflict with the drug cartels in Mexico has recently gained a large amount of media attention due to the increasingly bloody direction it has taken. Since his election 2006 Felipe Calderón of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) has followed a policy of military offensive against the drug cartels. The result has been an escalation of violence that has led to 28,000 deaths. Some urban parts of Mexico resemble a war zone, the rural parts look like an occupied country, patrolled by the army.

That the drug industry has not yet been brought under control by the offensive is not surprising. Drug trafficking and production in Mexico date back to the early 20th century where American prohibition and increasingly stringent drugs laws saw a boom in the cross border industry. This established the supply routes, government corruption and authority evasion tactics still used to this day. In addition to this it should be recognised that so long as drug trafficking remains a profitable enterprise it provides a huge attraction to a country in which there is rampant poverty. This explained why in the face of the global recession the drug trade has remained so resistant to the onslaught from the state.

In light of the rising death toll and the resilience of the narcotics industry the Calderón government has begun to consider other approaches to dealing with the issue, including the possibility of legalising the production and distribution of drugs.

The global recession and Mexico

Mexico is particularly badly hit by the recession, due largely to the economic dependence Mexico has towards its neighbour in the north. About 80 per cent of all Mexican exports are to the US, so the recession in the States has had a huge impact on the economy with falling demand triggering a recession in Mexico. This has caused a surge in unemployment which currently stands around 5.5 per cent officially. However the actual unemployment rate might be as high as 25 per cent, forcing many people into serious poverty despite the fact they have a wage coming in. In addition to this it must be remembered that there are a large number of Mexican immigrants in the United States who work to send money home. As American business began to make savings non-unionised and illegal immigrant labour was often the first to be shed, resulting in an additional economic blow to the impoverished Mexican workers as well as causing new problems in America itself which has steadily seen the rise of racist anti-immigrant sentiments and even legislation such as seen in Arizona. Despite this the lack of work and rampant violence continues to force people to attempt to cross the border into the USA. This is becoming increasingly dangerous as trigger-happy border guards use state of the art surveillance equipment to track anyone coming near the Rio Grande. In June a 15 year old, Sergio Adrian Hernandez, was shot dead on the Mexican side by a US border patrolmen, causing outrage across Mexico.

The Trade Unions in Mexico

Despite the dire state of the Mexican economy and the increasing attacks on conditions workers find that they are unable to effectively organise a resistance. This is due in no small part to the role played by the various trade unions which have historically enjoyed a very close symbiotic relationship with the government and the bourgeoisie. The largest of these was the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) which was officially affiliated with the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). As a union they were indispensable for the government in everything from demobilising worker militancy to pushing certain political agendas.

In exchange for this loyalty, for decades top union officials were able to gain various government positions and establish businesses with revenues from the unions themselves thus managing to break from a position of labour aristocracy into the capitalist world itself, in addition to this the government actively intervened to prevent the creation of independent trade unions

This influence began to diminish in the 1990s as the effects of neoliberal reforms led to the government increasingly falling under the sway of a new generation of technocrats. The defeat of the PRI in the presidential elections in 2000 marked the end of the party's 70 year grip on power. This would have been a blow to the unions had it not been for the continuing need, especially in light of the growing economic crisis, for the capitalists to exercise control over the workers. For this reason the reciprocal relationship between union leadership and government has been retained and in some cases strengthened.

Although the formally employed Mexican workforce is around 11 million, of which as many as 7 million are unionised, there are as many as another 40 million underemployed workers, usually in the informal economy. These workers are some of the poorest people in Mexico, and suffer worse than most under the partly liberalised Mexican economy.

The Mexican workers are in a difficult position. Movements to democratise the unions or establish new independent institutions are heavily repressed, and whilst some of the current unions are capable and do sometimes mobilise their members it is almost invariably some exercise in bargaining over the narrow interests of the leadership or a single industry.

In the last year six trade unionists have been killed in Mexico, some by police during protests but two trade union leaders, were targeted and killed by gunmen. One trade union leader, Jorge Luis Andrade Morales, the secretary of the Puerto de Veracruz Sindicato de Maniobrista was killed after giving a press conference condemning the government for violating the rights of his members. In October 2009 a veteran trade union leader of the Unión General Obrera, Campesina y Popular (UGOCP), Margarito Montes Parra, was killed along with 14 other people, including most of his family, by armed men firing automatic weapons into their vehicles. Parra had been active for decades organising farm workers and peasants, which made him many enemies amongst powerful landowners and drug lords. The violence of the highly militarised Mexican state, the drug gangs and the company thugs puts incredible pressure on the trade unions to organise themselves to defend their members and leaders.

But even the judicial system itself works against trade unionists. Another union organiser, Juan Linares Montúfar, the president of the General Vigilance and Justice Council of the national miners' and metalworkers' union, (SNTMMSRM) has been held in prison since December 2008. Despite the fact that all corruptions charges against him were dropped he has still not been released from prison.

This all stems from the reactionary anti working class nature of the political regime in Mexico. The Calderon government has launched serious onslaughts against organised labour in an attempt to break some of the more militant unions in the country. This is a necessary step to increasing the privatisation and neo liberalisation of the economy. In October 2009 Calderon sent the army and police into the offices of the state owned Luz y Fuerza del Centro electricity company and dissolved the company. This would have meant 44,000 workers losing their jobs and a further 20,000 pensioners who worked in the company previously with no income. The Mexican Electrical Workers' Union (SME) started a battle to save the company, staging mass demonstrations in Mexico City and calling on other unions to strike in solidarity with them after they were expelled from their workplaces.

Further violent anti-union action was taken in June against the miners on strike at Grupo Mexico's Cananea copper mine. The three year long strike was crushed by over 2,000 militarised police who used tear gas and brutal baton attacks to drive the miners out of the mine area, arresting some of the leaders and injuring many others. A previous attempt to retake the mine in February 2008 was met with defeat after the workers fought the police and forced them to retreat.

As Mexico faces being ripped apart by the violence associated with the war on drugs, the Mexican capitalist class looks to a renewed friendship with the US imperialists to the north as a way of stabilising their situation. In order for this to happen they must strategically defeat the most militant unions as a way of attracting more business investment into the country.

Solidarity with the Mexican working class and peasants in their struggles is of vital importance. Particularly important is a movement in the US which can provide active solidarity, not just around migrants' rights in places like Arizona but about the issue in Mexico which are causing so much hardship.

Most importantly the Mexican working class needs a party that can fight for its interests. Capitalism in Mexico is increasingly barbaric and violent. This crisis can Only be solved by a revolution that removes the Mexican capitalist class from power, breaks the organised power of the drug barons and establishes a workers' and peasants' government.

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