

Mexican Workers Call for a Continental Workers' Campaign For Living Wages and Social Justice

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Capital and the state of all three countries of the North American Free Trade Agreement have worked together to push down wages and working conditions, undermine the social safety net, and privatize anything that could be turned into a source of profit. The aim of both NAFTA and the Security and Prosperity Partnership – the project of “Deep Integration”) is to constitutionalize the rights of capital and undermine the rights of workers and the public. By incorporating Mexico into the geography of continentally integrated production, capital has been able to lower its wage bill and increase its power over labour. Relocation and the threat of relocation has been a powerful tool in forcing concessions on flexibility, wages, and working conditions.

Workers and unions have not effectively developed strategies of continental-wide solidarity and or fight-back. There have been some efforts in that direction in terms of solidarity with specific struggles, worker to worker exchanges, increased union contacts. A coalition of Mexican unions has now proposed a strategy of struggle that could open up the door to a more class-wide and continental approach to union and workers' struggles. While the initial proposal focused on the minimum wage, it could be broadened to include the needs of the unwaged poor as well as other rights of workers – the right to a job, the right to safe conditions of work, the right to housing. A continental fight-back around class-wide demands could reinvigorate the labour movements in all three countries. The article below focuses on the Mexican proposal and labour movement. In addition to describing the proposal, we put forth a description and analysis of Mexican unions and their role in Mexico's deep and ongoing crisis. Mexican workers are faced not only with a neoliberal assault on their rights and standards of living but also with an increasingly brutal and repressive state veiled in a corrupt and thin electoral process.

The Mexican Coalition

A coalition of progressive Mexican unions, democratic currents in other unions and popular movements, such as the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO), have made a bold proposal for a continental workers' struggle to raise the minimum wage in all three countries, limit the work day to eight hours, and enforce a ban on child labour. In Mexico, it is a response to the dramatic fall of real wages and the beginning of a fightback against the deepening neoliberal assault promised by the new, fraudulently elected President Calderon. The coalition campaign as the Jornada Nacional y Internacional Por la Restitución del Salario y Empleo (National and International Campaign for the Restoration of Wages and Jobs). It believes that the battle can only be won and consolidated on a continental scale. If the minimum salary and wages are raised in one country, those companies that can simply

relocate to those areas where wages remain lower will do so. The floor has to be raised in all three countries

The coalition is aware that a minimum wage increase in the U.S., without an increase in Mexico, will simply increase the incentive for companies to move to Mexico. They want jobs in Mexico but not at the expense of job loss in other countries and starvation wages in Mexico. They feel that these three minimum demands create the basis for a common struggle in all three countries. And while they feel the struggle should start in the three NAFTA countries, they want to spread it later to include all of Latin America and become a global campaign.

Beyond Borders: A Call for Solidarity

This proposal is a call from workers in the South to workers in the North to engage in a joint struggle against the corporations and governments that seek to play them off against each other in order to continue the downward slide of wages and living and working standards everywhere. NAFTA is part of the neoliberal assault on workers in Canada, Mexico and the United States. This assault on workers is the major part of the reason that over ten million Mexicans have been forced to leave their homes and families to work in the U.S. as the only means to survive. The proposal seeks to unite workers – Mexican, US, Canadian, Quebecois; white, Latino, and Black; those with stable and those with precarious employment, those with unions and those without, those with legal rights and those without – in a common struggle that will unite workers in all three countries. Success will bring real and desperately needed gains in the short run while building the bases for an international workers movement in the longer run. The campaign entailed by such a proposal seeks to move beyond solidarity as support for other peoples' struggles and toward solidarity as a common struggle.

The minimum wage in Mexico has fallen in real purchasing power by 75% in the last thirty years. During the presidency of Vicente Fox alone from 2000-2006, it fell by 22%. Ten million workers, 24% of the economically active population, make the minimum wage or less. Fifty million Mexicans live below the poverty line. Of these, 30 million live on 30 pesos per day (\$3 US), 10 million live on 22 pesos daily, another 10 million on less than 10 pesos daily. In order to buy what is officially defined as a basic household basket, a worker would have to work 48 hours daily! As well, the minimum wage affects vast layers of workers receiving more than the minimum wage as many collective agreements and labour contracts are formally or informally tied to changes in the official minimum wage.

But not all is bleak. In the same period, Mexico rose to the 4th top position in the world in the number of millionaires. And it boasts the third richest man in the world, Carlos Slim, who did very well indeed through privatizations. The top 20% in Mexico control 52.7% of Mexico's wealth while 30% of Mexicans subsist on less than one minimum salary per family per day. At the same time that the countryside has lost great numbers of people to the urban labour markets, Mexico's 40 million workers have become increasingly exploited receiving a declining portion of national income

The New Presidential Regime

The face of the new Presidency of Felipe Calderón is that of the IMF underwritten by fierce repression. The former Governor of the state of Jalisco, Francisco Ramírez Acuña, has been appointed Secretary of the Interior (Secretario de Gobernación). He took great pride in his

tough handling of the anti-corporate globalization protests in Guadalajara on May 28, 2004, a 'handling' it should be noted which was widely condemned by human rights groups for their brutality, arbitrary detentions and the use of torture. His appointment has been praised by business leaders who have said that disorder and protests in Mexico need to be handled with a "firm hand." Certainly, it was Ramírez Acuña and President, Calderón that decided (a few days before the official swearing in) to use extreme force, arbitrary arrests and torture in their attempt to smash the Oaxacan popular movement.

The economic ministries went to extreme neoliberals. Agustín Carstens, (a "Chicago boy") resigned a top position at the IMF to become Secretary of the Treasury. Luis Téllez, former Secretary of Energy (1997-2000) and a directing manager of the Carlyle group since December 2003 (whose job was to "co-lead Carlyle's first ever buyout investment activities in Mexico", Carlyle News, December 15, 2003), has been appointed Secretary of Telecommunications. And Georgina Kessel, the technocrat who has been one of the key people in carrying out privatizations in previous administrations and was one of the key designers of Plan Puebla Panama, a neoliberal plan to integrate southern Mexico and Central America into North American capitalism, has been appointed Secretary of Energy. The members of the cabinet in charge of social issues come from the far Catholic right. This is a regime that has announced by words, cabinet appointments and actions its intention to deepen neoliberal reforms, which would include changing labour law and privatizing oil and power.

The new government, however, faces three major obstacles: (1) its lack of legitimacy to a major part of the population who view its victory as a result of massive fraud; (2) the anger of much of the population at the decades of neoliberal attack on living standards, decent jobs and social rights now intensified with runaway price increases in basic foods in the brief period of the new Presidency; and (3) the lack of solid control of the President over the new Congress, whose party does not control either house.

Mexican Unions in the Crisis

The role of unions in Mexico's political crisis has been as heterogeneous as the character of unions in Mexico is at present. And the character of these unions has become more heterogeneous than in the past. Mexico's transition from a strongly state-dominated form of capitalist development to a neoliberal, "open" economy as well as the change from a one-party to a multi-party regime has undermined some of the mechanisms of control the old statist union oligarchy could rely upon. This union oligarchy, derisively called "charros" in Mexico, has been scrambling to protect its considerable power and wealth in this period of change. These changes in political regime and economic strategy have led the charros to try to adapt in various ways. The vast majority of unions remain thoroughly authoritarian but the already existing plurality of unions and union federations has widened as the charros maneuver to adapt to a more fluid and complex political-economic situation with weakened mechanisms of control.

Both the government and big business have been pushing to revise labour law to weaken unions and legislate workers' rights. And some aspects of Mexican labour law, although not always enforced, are very progressive. Workers' rights and union power are viewed as impediments to "progress".

While unions have been severely weakened by privatization and relocation within Mexico, the attempts at labour law reform have so far been stalemated by popular resistance and

legislative stalemate. The new government is determined to break this stalemate.

The existence of any union is viewed as a potential obstacle to the power of capital. Even the authoritarian, corrupt and government-linked unions often made significant gains for their members, sometimes in wages or benefits (health care and housing especially), or jobs in unionized workplaces for family members. While the margins for these gains have been sharply reduced by neoliberal restructuring, they are still important in many cases. It is these real gains for important sectors of unionized workers that have helped sustain the power of the authoritarian and corrupt union officialdom. But when these mechanisms of control fail, union officials have resorted to killings, beatings, or exclusion from union membership and consequent loss not only of jobs but of the various benefits (health, housing, jobs for family members) to maintain their power and privilege.

This weakness of democratic unionism in Mexico has been a key factor in constraining working class resistance to state authoritarianism and neoliberalism. While workers have been the mass base of the Obradorista movement against electoral fraud, working class organizations have not played a leading role in popular struggles, with the important exception of Oaxaca. The absence of a strong independent union movement or a workers' party has led to a situation in which workers have, in the main, been the base of other movements rather than having their own movement.

The weakness of working class resistance is strongly connected to the scarcity of real unions. The old system of labour control had been based on five key, inter-related pillars: (1) labour law that gave the state control over union recognition and the right to strike; (2) integration of the officially recognized unions into the ruling party and state apparatus; (3) authoritarian control over the unions by the union officialdom on the basis of state laws and links as well as the usual control mechanisms of an organizational oligarchy; (4) repression by the state and by thugs commanded by the charro officials; and, for some periods, (5) a social pact that allowed gains for limited sectors of the working class, especially in the realm of the social wage (most notably in the postwar expansion). Official unions have been part of the ruling party and union officials have either held union, party and government positions simultaneously or sequentially. Official unions have been state instruments in the working class and their leaders' power brokers within the existing regime. Mobilization by these unions – or more often than not, the threat of mobilization – has had little to do with union or class struggle. Rather it has been either a card to play in intra-regime struggles or a way of cooling out rank and file pressure for real actions.

Mexican unions combine features of a state institution, a party machine, and an employment service with those of a union. In general, they historically have been run in a thoroughly corrupt and authoritarian manner. They controlled labour market access, disciplined the work force, extorted money from workers and capital, and used their labour-managing role (both workplace and political) as part of their base for negotiating their interests with management, for their influence within the power bloc/PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), which governed Mexico for 70 years until its defeat in 2000. Mexican union officials could and did become capitalists either through setting up companies themselves (or in the name of family members) or by extracting surplus from control of union institutions that could then be used for investments. But the role of the "labour" elite as political actors and capitalist entrepreneurs required their ongoing control of unions and their related institutions. Union leaders moved back and forth between political party, governmental, and managerial positions in the public sector. They were not simply union bureaucrats but members of a hybrid elite sitting on top of hybrid institutions

in which “unions” were encased.

The New Terrain of Mexican Trade Unions

Pluralism among Mexican unions and labour federations is not new. The old one-party PRI government, at times, fostered pluralism and competition among unions and federations within the limits of loyalty to the PRI and its project of capitalist development. The government applied its divide and rule strategy to labour officialdom as well as to the rank and file of the working class. Union strategies have ranged from total submission to the neoliberal project to various degrees of resistance. There are also different perspectives, programs and strategies for what a new industrial relations regime should look like. But, with few exceptions, this has not led to significant change in the authoritarian internal character of most unions. Only a small number of unions have sought to confront the neoliberal project as a whole, though many do so rhetorically.

There are presently four significant union blocs: (1) La Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT), (2) El Frente Sindical Mexicano (FSM), (3) Congreso del Trabajo (CT), and (4) the Federación Democrática de Sindicatos de Servidores Públicos, FEDESSP (the nucleus and main contingent of the FEDESSP, is the teachers union SNTE of Elba Esther Gordillo). It is very hard to estimate the real number of union members as there are so many protection contracts and company unions. However, it's clear that the real rate of unionization is the lowest of the three NAFTA countries. The most militant of the union blocs are the least numerous. The FSM has about 5% of the total union membership, the UNT 10% whereas the CT and FEDESSP control about 85% of organized workers.

The national teachers union, the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de Educación (SNTE), has been a key element in the PRI, the PRI-PAN alliance, and recently in executing an important part of the electoral fraud for Calderón. As a reward, they have been given great control over the federal department of education. Section 22 of the SNTE, the section of the state of Oaxaca, which carved out great autonomy in decades of struggle against the national leadership, has played the leading role in the Oaxaca revolt.

The most gangsterist of the old guard charro unions continue to support the PRI and the PAN (Partido Accion Nacional – conservative Catholic party), whichever of them governs that particular jurisdiction. And they are rewarded, as was the national leadership of the teachers union, with state back-up for maintaining their authoritarian control over their members.

The moderate and authoritarian dissident unions (telephone and social security/public health) continue to play an ambiguous role, fighting to “modernize” labour relations, which in the case of the telefonistas means allying with their boss, Carlos Slim, in exchange for protection of their jobs and the social security union has collaborated with massive cut-backs of employment and public services, though, at times, being forced by their rank and file to mobilize protests. These unions, along with STUNAM, dominate the UNT, the new dissident federation, founded in 1997. They supported López Obrador in the election campaign but have now “critically accepted” the election of Felipe Calderón. They have made a pact with the congressional alliance that supports López Obrador but have distanced themselves from any extra-institutional challenges to the government. They do not participate in the Convención Nacional Democrática (CND) – the movement against the electoral fraud and in support of the “defeated” presidential candidate, López Obrador. Nor have they issued any statement about the popular movement in Oaxaca, APPO. They seek

to be a loyal opposition to the illegitimate President and to try to negotiate a new, modernizing social contract with themselves as the intermediaries.

There were many who hoped that the UNT, in spite of its authoritarian and cautious leadership (its leader, Francisco Hernández Juárez, after all, was a favourite unionist of the neoliberal President Salinas, 1988-1994), would set in motion a democratizing dynamic and start to organize workers.

But they have failed to make any serious efforts in that direction. Their strategy has been moderate mobilization to pressure for negotiations with the government. They are completely averse to any challenges to the regime that would threaten them either by state repression or rank and file revolt.

The more militant and left unions and democratic currents of other unions tend to be part of the FSM (Frente Sindical Mexicano). Two of the key unions there are the Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (SME) and the Sindicato Independiente de Trabajadores de la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (SITUAM).

While the working class continues to be the mass base of the major revolts (Obradorista and Oaxaqueno), only a small number of unions play an important role in these revolts. But those that are involved in popular struggles do so alongside other forms of working class organizations, such as neighbourhood associations and democratic currents in non-democratic unions. The working class as a class has not yet found its own voice and organizational forms of struggle in Mexico's national crisis with the exception of the APPO. This is the key missing ingredient in the possibility of a successful national struggle to defeat the authoritarian, neoliberal government.

México 2007: The Labyrinth of Counter-revolution

The new presidency started with two big bangs. The first was the massive repression of the popular movement of Oaxaca. Though its' most brutal and decisive act took place a week before Calderón took office officially, it can be seen as the first major act of the new presidency. The second was the combination of a miserly increase in the official minimum wage with runaway inflation in the costs of basic food commodities (especially tortillas). And most recently there has been an assault on the pensions of public sector workers (raising the age of retirement, reduction in average pensions, individualization of pensions and privatization of their management)

Calderón is determined to overcome the roadblocks to deepening neoliberal restructuring and continental integration that stymied the previous Fox presidency. The roadblocks were based on the pressure of popular resistance on the divided and vacillating members of the old ruling party, the PRI, leading them at times to oppose key structural reforms. As the Right did not have a majority by itself in the old Congress — and doesn't in the new — the opposition of the PRD combined with the vacillation of the PRI was able to block the passage of key legislation around labour law reform and privatization. The Calderón government is determined to overcome these obstacles by brutal repression of popular protest on the one hand and the squeezing the PRI where it hurts-their lucrative links with the drug lords. They can pass legislation and harass movements through these measures but they can't gain legitimacy. The more they rule by force, the less legitimacy they will have. The government of the Right is determined, violent and mean-spirited but their rule is fragile.

While the events of the last year show the fragility of the project of the Right, they also show the limitations of the popular resistance, a resistance that is wide and deep but also fragmented and without strategic unity. Calderón has attempted to appear as the hero on horseback in the midst of a society with close to all-out war among the drug lords for control of the main drug routes. The violence of the drug wars reached unprecedented levels in the first months of the new presidency, with weekly tolls of dozens dead in cities such as Monterrey, Acapulco, Veracruz, Guadalajara and Morelia. Calderón's use of the armed forces to regulate and attenuate the drug wars allows him to appear as the guarantor of law and order to the general public while he uses and normalizes the use of the armed forces to control social disorder, and movements of social protest. But, more immediately, it gives him great leverage for negotiating with the PRI in those states and cities in which they remain strong and have significant congressional representation. As many local media sources have asserted, if Calderón can determine who will survive and participate in the huge drug market, the PRlistas will play ball in other areas, so as not to be displaced from the lucrative subterranean activities in which their local and regional leaders appear to be involved.

The use of the armed forces in the various states has given Calderón the leverage he needs in Congress to have a majority for his reforms: the elimination of what's left of the welfare state in Mexico, a fiscal reform aimed at a new cycle of redistribution of wealth away from the poor and working people, and the private appropriation of what's left of the public sector, most importantly the oil and power industries. He can now destroy those PRlistas that resist his neoliberal reforms. The arrival of Calderón to the presidency has made the International Monetary Fund much more optimistic about reforms in Mexico, as they stated on April 13. The hour for a Mexican fast-track has arrived: the definitive dismantling of the ruins of the old Estado Nacional Popular and an open road to the complete neoliberalization of Mexico.

The overwhelming majority of the population, however, opposes this reactionary assault. The mass popular resistance is a diffuse conglomerate of forces linked more by nostalgia than by a common national project. The popular forces continue to have a tremendous capacity of mobilization and a powerful public presence. This has begun to split the country into two realities: the one, the institutional; the other, that of the street. For the moment, the conservative "majority" that controls the major institutions seems unstoppable.

The Mexican Resistance and a Continental Campaign for Living Wages

The popular forces of resistance are in an orderly retreat without being demoralized or discouraged. There is still a combative spirit but there is not (yet) a dominant view of the tactics and strategy of the fight-back. The popular resistance is debating, taking stock, exploring different paths and will likely emerge again more strongly in the coming period. They know that Calderón lacks a popular mandate and that his power is ephemeral, resting only on the extortion of the PRI politicians, but that as a whole, his proposals are thoroughly unpopular.

The simmering popular discontent and the relentless offensive of the Right – as well as state elections in Oaxaca and elsewhere – makes it likely that the next months will be ones of intense struggle. The labour and political left, grouped in its diverse variants, is preparing for a counter-offensive. The SME was able to once again bring together the major national currents of popular resistance in the Cuarto Dialogo Nacional (4th National Dialogue) in early February 2007: the communal farmers of Atenco, APPO (the popular movement of

Oaxaca), the Frente Sindical Mexicano, the CNTE as well as about 600 other organizations (unions, social movements, indigenous organizations, left currents) who agreed on a common plan of action for the next months whose first actions occurred in the first weeks of May.

The big mobilizations of this past March are a good indicator of the possibilities. The Convención Nacional Democrática (CND) brought tens of thousands into the streets on March 25, filling the Zócalo, in a great act of opposition to the program of Calderón. Only two days later, a new mass mobilization took place, of which only a small portion had been involved in that of the CND, now composed of the labour opposition to the reactionary government, that brought tens of thousands of workers onto the streets of Mexico City in opposition to the counter-reforms of the pension system pushed through by Calderón. And the EZLN (still absent from the great coalitions of resistance of the last few years) has initiated a second national tour of the Other Campaign, preparing sections of the population who have lost hope in the institutional political spaces, for playing an important role in the rapid movement of the country towards increasingly sharp confrontations. Mexico is in a situation of catastrophic equilibrium in which the counter-revolution has not been able to consolidate power with legitimacy but in which the forces of resistance have not been able to do more than slow down the assault. The new government is seeking to break the equilibrium through a blitzkrieg of deeper neoliberal reforms and heavy-handed repression. The popular forces are groping for ways to move beyond resistance to a majoritarian rebellion for a different Mexico.

Progressive unions and other segments of the working class have played important roles in mobilizing resistance to neoliberalism and fighting for democracy and justice. But for a long time, growing working class anger has been contained by the gangsterist unions as well as union structures that have only mobilized to protect the interests of their own oligarchic leaders or, less frequently, their own members. As most of the working class lacks unions, they have been with limited organized expression in defence of their own interests. For that reason working class discontent has expressed itself more in the form of support for other movements (Obradorism) or as local movements without national articulation. The very limited existence of genuine unions has been a major obstacle to the working class playing a significant mobilizing role in this extremely proletarianized and increasingly pauperized nation. The goal of the la Jornada Nacional e Internacioal Por la Restitución del Salario y Empleo is to put working class demands at the center of the struggle in Mexico and to do so in a manner that is national and international at the same time. If Canadian and US workers can join with Mexican workers in a common campaign of struggling for decent wages, workers' rights, and an end to poverty, the contours of a new North America would begin to emerge.

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Jornada Nacional y Internacional Por la Restitucion del Salario y Empleo National and International Campaign for the Restoration of Wages and Jobs

November 8, 2006

The most important social pact is the Constitution. However, for three decades, successive federal governments have flagrantly violated the terms of Article 123 of the Constitution: they have not promoted job creation, they have discouraged and boycotted community or cooperative efforts to create employment, tolerated and even encouraged exhausting and inhumane workdays, ignored the use of child labour, and above all, have made the constitutional definition of general minimum wages a dead letter: a wage “sufficient to satisfy the normal needs of a head of family; in material, social, and cultural areas; and to provide the obligatory education to their children.”

Therefore, by systematically betraying their oath to “observe and uphold the Mexican Constitution”, those who have governed during the neoliberal cycle have condemned the majority of the country’s workers to a harsh choice: hunger or superexploitation.

Today, in order to pay for the basic “family basket” (canasta básica) – composed of food, personal hygiene and household cleaning products, transportation, electricity and domestic gas – workers earning the minimum wage would have to work 48 hours a day, and many more than that in order to also cover rent, education, health care, clothing, recreation and cultural activities.

Over 10 million workers – 24 percent of the workforce – receive less than the minimum wage, or no wage at all [e.g. when heads of families are contracted to fulfill a specific task with the understanding that other members of the family will also work, though without pay] Some manage to obtain an income higher than the minimum wage by holding two or more jobs. Millions of households have found themselves obliged to send their elderly or their children to work in order to raise the household income to the absolute minimum needed for survival.

Between 1977 and 2006 the Mexican minimum wage lost 75 percent of its purchasing power, one of the most brutal drops in average people’s incomes that has taken place on the planet.

This phenomenon has not occurred by coincidence or by accident; it is the consequence of a sustained plan by the various federal governments, on several different pretexts: to control inflation, attract foreign investment or generate jobs.

All of these justifications have been proven false. Inflation has shot up several times, due to stock market and currency speculation as happened in 1987, due to catastrophic governmental errors as in 1994-95, or due to the global policy of price liberalization. This data demonstrates that the only commodity whose price is being controlled is the work force, through a minimum wage that keeps them in abject poverty.

Foreign investment plummeted in the current six-year presidential term, during which the country has also lost 5 percent of the formal jobs registered by the Mexican Social Security Institute. The real motives of those in power for pulverizing minimum wages are different than the pretexts mentioned above: to dismantle workers’ organizations, eliminate their historic conquests and create conditions favouring the increase of profits on national and foreign capital.

The strategies for wage containment constitute a deliberate policy of plundering from millions of Mexicans for the benefit of a handful of millionaires. They represent, as well, the most brutal offensive by capital and its allies in the governmental sphere – the President,

the Secretaries of Finance, Work and Social Security, Economy, and even the legislature and the judiciary – perpetrated by those occupying the highest offices in the governmental structures, in order to systematically and flagrantly violate the Constitution.

Of course, keeping wages down has not translated into lower inflation, nor into economic reactivation or job creation. On the contrary, its consequences have been the infuriating and alarming intensification of misery and poverty, the concentration of wealth in only a few hands, the weakening of the internal market, and the enormous growth of the informal economy.

These disastrous economic results have alarming parallels at a societal level: the deepening of inequalities, an abysmal drop in the standard of living of the general population, a pronounced deterioration in health, education and housing, massive emigration, the rending of the social fabric and unquantifiable suffering for the majority of the population.

The national economy has been brought to a point in which work has ceased being a right and become instead a privilege. However, if the majority of the “privileged” who have a formal job are being obliged to accept starvation wages, the perspectives for the unemployed are much worse.

With or without jobs, fifty million Mexicans are below the poverty line:

some 30 million live on 30 pesos per day, that is to say, two thirds of the current minimum wage; 10 million live on 22 pesos a day, and a similar number subsist on 12 pesos and 21 centavos a day. Whether they have a job or not, these millions of Mexicans are not being offered any future other than to become beggars or criminals or to try their luck venturing toward a northern border that has become ever more hostile and deadly.

The implications of the offensive against salaries on the political, institutional and legal spheres has been no less pernicious. The country is confronted with a federal authority that openly violates constitutional precepts, a government that has opted to ignore its legal obligations, a political authority that promotes the dispossession of the many for the benefit of the few, provokes the deterioration of institutions, promotes the discrediting of public authorities, and subverts the possibilities of Mexicans being able to live peacefully and harmoniously together.

The government policy of depreciation of the minimum wage and, in general, the lack of observance by governments of what is stipulated in Article 123 of the Constitution, are not merely infractions of the law, but rather have resulted in a country that is morally unsustainable, politically ungovernable, socially uninhabitable and economically unviable.

Society as a whole, and in particular workers’ organisations, are facing the duty to rescue the primordial agreement on which the ability to live together peacefully rests in Mexico, which is the Constitution. It is necessary, therefore, to call a national mobilization to defend Article 123, for the following purposes:

***To demand the fulfillment of the constitutional definition of the minimum wage, which “must be sufficient to satisfy the normal needs of a head of family; in material, social, and cultural areas; and to provide the obligatory education to their children.”

***To ensure that the right to dignified and socially useful work is respected.

This call is to:

***organise ourselves, nationally and internationally, to ensure that the Constitutional mandates are fulfilled.

***undertake political and juridical actions aimed at restoring the spirit and letter of the Constitution.

***hold regional, national and international forums to ensure that Article 123 is respected.

***hold a “March for Wages and Work”, on December 7, in Mexico City.

For the above reasons, we call together workers, women, peasants, national and international unions, the unemployed, informal workers, non-governmental organisations in Mexico and overseas, students, migrant workers, human rights organisations, people excluded by neoliberalism and by the political powers that have turned their backs on our Constitution.

“We want a fair minimum wage, work and opportunities within our Mexico, now! Mexico City, November 8, 2006

Signators:

Frente Sindical Mexicano (FSM) Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (SME), Alianza de Tranviarios de México (ATM), Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos y Similares (SNTMM), Confederación de Trabajadores y Campesinos (CTC), Sindicato de Trabajadores de la UNAM (STUNAM), Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT), Sindicato Independiente de Trabajadores de la UAM (SITUAM), Federación Nacional de Agrupaciones Sindicales (FNAS), Consejo Nacional de los Trabajadores (CNT), Coordinadora Nacional Politécnica (CNP-IPN), Centro de Investigación Laboral y Asesoría Sindical (CILAS), Cooperativa Pascual, Coalición Nacional de Trabajadores del INEGI, Sindicato Único de Trabajadores de la Industria Nuclear SUTIN, Sindicato de Trabajadores al Servicio de los Poderes del Estado (STSPE) Querétaro, Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO), Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE), Lic. Arturo Alcalde Justiniano, Diputado Federal Ramón Pacheco Llanes y Diputado Federal José Antonio Almazán González, Centro de Análisis Multidisciplinario de la Facultad de Economía (CAM-UNAM), Sindicato de Trabajadores de Transporte del D.F. (STTPDF), Frente Nacional de Resistencia contra la Privatización de la Industria Eléctrica (FNRCPIE), Asociación Nacional de Abogados Democráticos (ANAD).

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Call for a Continental Campaign for a Living Wage and End to Poverty

The processes of continental integration and the relentless offensive of neoliberalism against working people has created the potential of beginning to build a continent-wide struggle for decent wages. There already are a variety of struggles in each of our countries but they are presently isolated one from another. Our hope is to take advantage of the potential to link up and build something broader and deeper while respecting the autonomy of each movement.

The initiative for a continent wide movement for decent wages was first taken by a coalition of progressive Mexican unions, democratic currents in other unions and popular movements who made a bold proposal for a continental workers struggle to raise the minimum wage in all three countries this past November. We are trying to continue the momentum and extend it to include addressing the needs of all those in or near poverty by forming a Toronto committee that could then reach out to make links with the rest of Canada and Quebec as well as Mexico and the US.

This campaign could therefore link working people of all three countries

— Mexican, US, Canadian, Quebecois; white, Latino, and Black; workers with stable jobs, precarious jobs or no jobs at all, those with unions and those without, those with legal rights and those without — in common struggle against poverty in all of North America. We hope you will join us to build this movement and develop these links.

We urge you to form a local or regional committee in your areas. Please let us know of your activities and we will begin to develop a network of committees in each country and across the continent.

Please endorse the following call for a continental campaign for higher minimum wages and circulate to interested people or organizations:

We, the undersigned organisations, hereby endorse the call by Mexican organisations for a joint campaign to increase the minimum wage in Mexico, the US and Canada to levels that allow working people to provide a dignified standard of living for themselves and their families in whichever country they live in. We agree to work together with other like-minded organisations in all three countries on concrete activities to promote this goal.

Signed: _____

On behalf of: _____

For more information, contact info@socialistproject.ca

Key organizations in the Mexican Minimum Wages Coalition

The following section will provide some background on the main organizations involved in la Jornada Nacional e Internacional Por la Restitución del Salario y Empleo The statement and list of the sponsoring organizations follows, in Spanish. The committee is broader than the Frente Sindical Mexicana (FSM) which includes some of the organizations below but also others not affiliated with the FSM, which is not a federation but an alliance. There is a fluidity and overlap in various coalitions, some being more ad hoc and temporary, some more long-term. Some unions belong to several alliances and also to a federation. Some unions do not belong to any federation.

The SME (Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas — power workers). SME has about 60,000 members, employed by Mexican Light and Power. The union celebrated its 92nd anniversary this past December and is well known for its long history of internal democracy with competitive elections and changes of leadership. It is also a very nationalist union and has often been the key organization in forming broad alliances and struggles over workers' rights and the protection of national patrimony. It has been the main driving force in the FSM and is held in high esteem by democratic unionists in Mexico.

SNTMM (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos y Similares de la República Mexicana — miners and steelworkers union).

SNTMM has around 70,000 members. The previous government of President Vicente Fox deposed its leader who is now in informal exile in Vancouver, supported by the USWA (United Steelworkers of America). The government deposed him and installed a stooge after the union sharply criticized the government and the company involved for a big, deadly mining disaster in Pasta de Canchos, Coahuila on February 19, 2006 in which 65 miners were killed. It is not a very democratic union and has a very top-down and centralized leadership but has shown growing militancy in recent years.

The base is very combative and the vast majority of members and locals support the deposed leadership. There have been big strikes and battles with the police over union autonomy and workers' demands. It is a member of three groupings: CT (the official federation of unions), the UNT and the FSM. The battle of the SNTMM with the government over union autonomy continues.

STUNAM (Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México). STUNAM is a union of about 30,000 members at the largest university in Latin America (300,000 students), and developed out of the student struggles of the early 1970s. It is a union that works closely and collaboratively with the administration of the university. It is affiliated both to the FSM and UNT.

SITUAM (Sindicato Independiente de Trabajadores de la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana). It is the union of UAM, with about 5000 members (blue-collar, white-collar, and academic), and is an extremely democratic and combative union. As with the SME, there are tight restrictions on re-election. A member can only serve in a particular office for one term and can only serve as a union official for a total of two terms in a lifetime for a total of four years. It is a key actor in the FSM. Its political role is much more important than its size would indicate. It recently hosted the founding convention of the APPM (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Mexico, an attempt to make national and transnational the model of struggle and organization of APPO—see below for APPO). It also was the moving force in starting the Coordinadora Intersindical Primero de Mayo (Inter-union Coordinating Committee May First) in 1995 which grouped militant unions, dissident union currents and popular movements in a common front. Inter-Sindical May 1 had a brief role in linking left unions and popular forces but later died a quiet death.

APPO (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca). This coalition of teachers and a variety of popular organizations carried out a generally peaceful but militant urban insurrection against repression, authoritarianism and neoliberalism. They controlled and ran Oaxaca City for over 5 months until the massive state repression on November 25, 2006. The core of the movement, initially, was the Oaxaca state section of the teachers union, Section 22, which is part of a national dissident organization within the teachers union, the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de Educación (CNTE). The APPO was a popular assembly, a coalition of Section 22 and a great variety of popular forces. It exemplifies a model of popular, democratic insurrection and governance. Though brutally suppressed, it survives and there are ongoing attempts to form a national APPO.

CNTE (National Coordinator of Workers in Education — teachers). The CNTE is an organized national alliance of dissident teachers currents in the SNTE (the national teachers union). The CNTE has existed for over 30 years within the SNTE despite assassinations,

disappearances and firings carried out by the SNTE. The SNTE is a gangster-charro union with over a million members. The CNTE is anti dual unionist but does carry out its own campaigns. It consists of a few state sections, some locals and dissidents in other sections. The CNTE is very militant and often has deep community roots and engagement in broad, popular struggles, as in the case of Oaxaca.

FAT (Frente Autentico de Trabajo). The FAT was founded in 1960 as a Catholic reformist organization with the intent of developing independent unionism and cooperatives. It became secular over the years and has played a central role in promoting democratic and autonomous unionism and promoting labour law reform. It is composed of unions, cooperatives, and both producers and neighbourhood associations and, in total, is estimated to have between 30,000 and 40,000 members.

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