

The Mexican Teachers' Movement in the Context of Neoliberal Education Policy & Strategies for Resistance

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Abstract

Mexican teachers experienced an intensification of neoliberal education policy during the sexenio of President Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) from 2013 to 2018. Many tenaciously resisted, led by the National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE), a dissident movement within the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), whose official leadership aligned itself with the government. This article situates the Mexican teachers' movement within the global context of neoliberal policy which despite setbacks, has gradually transformed significant aspects of teachers' work and education. Despite undermining the standardized teacher exam mandated by the Ley de Servicio Profesional Docente of 2013, in other areas the neoliberalization of education advances, particularly the undermining of teachers' professional training, the 'datafication' of their work and increasingly hierarchical workplace relations. These policies have the potential to undermine teachers' professional autonomy, and facilitate the degradation of their work, with consequences for their ability to meet the diverse needs of their students. Meanwhile, the movement has struggled to consolidate beyond its stronghold in southern Mexico. The survival and limited victories of the CNTE owe much to drawing on the socially embedded nature of teachers' work, and its capacity to build alliances with communities and popular movements.

Introduction

Mexican teachers experienced an intensification of neoliberal education policy during the sexenio of President Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) from 2013 to 2018. Many tenaciously resisted, led by the National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE), a dissident movement within the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), whose official leadership has consistently aligned itself with the government. This article situates the

struggle of the Mexican teachers' movement, primarily oriented around the CNTE, within the global context of neoliberal policy which despite setbacks, has gradually transformed significant aspects of teachers' work and education. The CNTE undermined the standardized teacher exam mandated in 2013 under the Ley de Servicio Profesional Docente (Professional Teaching Service Law), with years of resistance culminating in a powerful wave of strikes and protests over the summer of 2016. However, the dissident teachers' movement has struggled to consolidate beyond its stronghold in southern Mexico, and the control over the SNTE by the pro-government 'institutional' faction led by Juan Diaz de la Torre has not diminished. In a context in which teachers are the most militant and visible component of a national labour movement on the defensive, its survival and limited victories owe much to drawing on the socially embedded nature of teachers' work, and its capacity to build alliances with communities and popular movements.

This article considers the balance upon the conclusion of Peña Nieto's term, and the end of an important cycle in neoliberal education governance and teachers' resistance, with the election to the presidency of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the Morena party. Peña Nieto's policies are situated within a global context of neoliberal education policy, whose manifestations in the US are particularly influential in Mexico (Bocking 2015a). Prominent multilateral actors including the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), have collaborated with domestic business advocacy groups like Mexicanos Primero and political parties, especially the PRI. Major policies appear to have endured which have the potential to undermine teachers' professional autonomy. These include the undermining of teacher education, a shift in the role of school directors from colleagues to managers, and the promotion of the

‘datafication’ of teachers’ work. Taken together, these policies have the potential to undermine teachers’ professional autonomy, and facilitate the degradation of their work, with consequences for their ability to meet the diverse needs of their students. The dissident teachers’ movement has won important victories, but at the cost of lengthy and difficult struggles, and with limited further consolidation within the official union.

Research for this article draws on semi-structured interviews in Mexico City, conducted with secondary school teachers, CNTE activists and leaders, and officials with the Secretary of Public Education (SEP). A total of 27 individuals were interviewed, varying in length from 45 minutes to an hour and a half, with some participating in follow-up discussions. I also conducted a content analysis of relevant policy documents. Much of this research was conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation from 2015 to 2017, with subsequent field work conducted in 2018.

The Neoliberalization of Mexican Education within National and Global Contexts

The trajectory of education in Mexico should be understood within both the global context of neoliberal education policy, particularly as reflected in the United States, and the historical evolution of power and society within Mexico itself. As Stevenson (2017) contends, insights on its consequences for teachers’ work can be drawn from Harry Braverman’s (1974) labour process theory on the rise of managerial control and the concurrent deskilling of labour. A key manifestation of the neoliberalization of education has been the erosion of teachers’ professional autonomy. This has occurred through the loss of professional judgement and increased subordination to the control of supervisors (school principals and superintendents) via the monitoring of their work by standardized evaluations of themselves and their students

(Bocking 2017). The increasing use of quantitative data by governments, purporting to measure teacher effectiveness and ensure their ‘accountability’, while in practice undermining teachers’ control over their own work has been described as the ‘datafication’ of teaching by Stevenson (2017). According to Stevenson, this process is about more than the intensification of teachers’ work “getting more for less” in the form of steadily rising test scores in a context of fiscal austerity. It also has broader implications over how teachers teach, with the imperative of continually producing better quantitative results creating the rationale for the increasing micromanagement of their work by mandating the further standardization of instruction. Ultimately this process is about what it means to be a teacher, calling into question the relative weight of purely academic engagement with students versus delivering emotional or caring labour.

How this has occurred in Mexico holds important similarities with other jurisdictions subjected to the ‘Global Education Reform Movement’ (GERM) (Sahlberg 2011), but also differences related to the evolution of the Mexican state and labour in the 20th Century. One of the structural features most relevant to teachers’ work in the context of its neoliberalization, was the rise of a highly centralized state, governed under one-party rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and its predecessors from 1929 to 2000 (Lenti 2017). The taming of Mexico’s combative labour movement by the PRI through corporatist systems of control manifested itself in the state takeover in 1948 of the SNTE, founded five years earlier at the urging of the government. Major dissident movements emerged in the late 1950s among Mexico City’s teachers in a context of broader labour ferment, but were soon suppressed (Peláez 1984); and again in 1979 with the founding of the CNTE in Chiapas and Oaxaca, which subsequently

spread to other states (Foweraker 1993; Cook 1996). The CNTE remains the most important dissident movement within the SNTE. Yet despite consolidating its power in several southern states and the existence of supporters elsewhere, notably in Mexico City, it has never been able to challenge the control of PRI-backed officials in the majority of states or at the union's national level. The SNTE represents nearly all of Mexico's 1.4 million public primary and secondary (middle) school teachers and support staff, making it the largest union in Latin America.¹

Narratives on the origins of the neoliberalization of education commonly begin in the mid 1980s with the publication by the US Department of Education of *A Nation at Risk*, which set a precedent for identifying a 'crisis' in public education on the basis of test scores². With contemporary interest in 'Total Quality Management' in manufacturing and other sectors, the report helped usher in the growing use of standardized evaluations for both teachers and students, with steadily higher and more punitive stakes for both. Mexico's earliest standardized student exams for entrance to the upper secondary and post secondary levels followed soon after. They were modelled after the US Educational Testing Service and timed for implementation prior to the inauguration of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 (Aboites 2012). A form of merit pay for teachers was also launched in the early 1990s in Mexico, then in its early stage of conceptualization and promotion in the US, with the endorsement of the SNTE (Hecock 2014), but with less punitive consequences than in its later implementation in school jurisdictions in the US and the UK (Ravitch 2013; Kuhn 2014).

¹ Teachers in public high schools, serving grades 10-12, which are alternately run directly by municipal governments, especially in Mexico City, or as preparatory schools for universities, are represented by an array of independent regional unions.

² The basis on which this was originally claimed has since been challenged by statisticians and education scholars (Kamenetz 2018).

More recently, the bipartisan drive in the US towards test-based accountability of teachers has been epitomized by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, that mandated states implement standardized testing and made the continued existence of schools dependent on pass scores. The Race to the Top program under the Obama administration subsequently offered financial incentives for states to tie teacher salaries and job security to student test scores (Hursh 2007, 2013). Politically powerful groups in Mexico have found inspiration in these policies. Mexicanos Primero (Mexicans First), founded in 2005 by Claudio X. González Guajardo, former president of the philanthropy arm of Televisa, Mexico's largest media conglomerate and son of the billionaire president of Kimberly Clark Mexico, came to public prominence with the release of *De Panzazo!* (Barely Passing) in 2011. The documentary film castigated the Mexican education system for failing its most marginalized students, and fingered the SNTE as the primary culprit for allegedly protecting bad teachers.³ The trajectory of reasoning closely resembled that of *Waiting for Superman*, released months earlier with a very high profile in the US (Bacon 2013; Bocking 2015a). Mexicanos Primero became the most prominent champion within Mexico of the standardized teacher evaluation program that defined much of the legacy of President Enrique Peña Nieto's education agenda. As protests and strikes by the CNTE peaked against Peña Nieto's education policies in the summer of 2016, Claudio González Guajardo, supported by Mexico's leading industry lobby group, the Business Coordination Council, denounced the movement as a "minority group impeding the daily life of millions of Mexicans" (Bacon 2016) urging the government to stand firm.

³ The film obtained a wide release in Mexican cinemas owned by the Cineapolis chain, whose president is on the board of Mexicanos Primero.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), has become the most important multilateral organization for the development and diffusion of global education policy. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a comparative standardized exam for students in which Mexico has participated alongside other OECD nations since 2000, and which helped the OECD supplant the dominant authority of UNESCO over education policy, has become a primary vehicle for generating political rationales for policy mobility (Addey & Sellar 2017). As Addey and Sellar (2017) argue, national governments are driven by a diverse range of motivations to enrol their countries in PISA. These range from a desire to be included in a fast growing club (72 countries participated in the 2015 PISA test, up from 28 in 2000) led by the world's wealthiest countries, to wielding the test results within national politics to vindicate or castigate the status quo. The latter motive is echoed in the business press, with the *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times* and *The Economist* giving significant coverage to the PISA test, conferring great importance to its scores. Using score results to claim public education is in crisis, their solution is not increased funding, but rather an increased role for the private sector in public education, and that teachers must be subject to increased control and reduced autonomy (Steiner-Khamsi, Appleton & Vellani 2018).

These framings were much in evidence in Mexico in 2012 and 2013, as Peña Nieto drew together his education agenda with the backing of the 'Pact for Mexico', a tactical alliance of the PRI with the two largest opposition parties, the right wing National Action Party (PAN) and the centre-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), to pass significant legislation during the initial years of his presidency, in the previously deadlocked congress. Peña Nieto spoke repeatedly in public with OECD general secretary and former PRI politician, Jose Angel Gurría,

lauding the relevance of *Getting it Right: Strategic Reforms for Mexico* (OECD 2013), in turn endorsed by Mexicanos Primero (Bocking 2015a). It is important to emphasize that while it claims to adopt international ‘best practices’, the Mexican state retains its primary agency in the elaboration of policy. Contrary to the assertions of both nationalists and zealous globalists, it is not compelled by foreign forces to implement a specific education agenda (Bocking 2015a). Yet specific multilateral agencies, the OECD above all, enjoy a high degree of cross-partisan legitimacy. The public presentation of the OECD’s 2018 edition of *Getting it Right* for Mexico, timed to coincide with the peak of the national election, drew senior advisors from all major parties to formally receive the report, including the ultimately victorious Morena, which claimed it had many similarities with its own platform (Reyna Quiroz 2018).

Enrique Peña Nieto’s Education Policies: Impacts on Teachers’ Work & Employment

The government of Enrique Peña Nieto sought to overcome the unsuccessful efforts of his predecessor, Felipe Calderon of the PAN, to transform the conditions and terms of teachers’ work, largely in the direction of reducing job security. In some initiatives, Calderon was successful, notably in the partial conversion in 2008 of guaranteed defined benefit to variable defined contribution pension plan for future teachers, alongside all public sector workers affiliated with the state social security system (ISSSTE). However a plan in 2011, endorsed by SNTE president Elba Esther Gordillo, to use test scores from a new national student standardized exam, the ENLACE, to determine job security and salary progression, met with fervent resistance from teachers within and outside of the CNTE. The exam was scrapped in 2013, as national authorities found it statistically invalid due to both organized boycotts and smaller scale

sabotage at the school level (Aboites 2012; Mexico City SEP Official 2, Interviewed May 2015). Similar forms of ‘Value Added Measurement’, which purport to quantify how much an individual teacher has improved student learning through the use of test scores, were widely implemented at the state and local level across the US during this time, promoted as part of the aforementioned ‘Race to the Top’ program (Hursh 2013). The World Bank pushed for its implementation in Latin America and the Caribbean (Bruns & Luque 2014).

With solid backing from the major opposition parties through the ‘Pact for Mexico’, and highly publicized endorsements domestically from Mexicanos Primero and abroad from the OECD, Peña Nieto practiced a form of ‘fast policy’ (Peck & Theodore 2015). He drew on the input of these groups to elaborate sweeping policy centring on the terms of teachers’ employment, between his election victory in July 2012 and inauguration the following December, and then passed amendments to the national constitution through the chamber of deputies and the senate, ratified by a majority of state legislatures, by early February 2013. Under the rationale of ensuring a ‘quality education’ was provided to all students, the amendments stipulated that teachers would be subjected to standardized evaluations to obtain employment, maintain their positions and to apply for promotions. The testing would be conducted by an existing government agency, the National Institute for Education Evaluation (INEE), which would now be fully autonomous (González, Rivera, Guerra 2016). In September 2013, the government enacted the Professional Teaching Service Law (Ley de Servicio Profesional Docente), which outlined the implementation of the testing. In a parallel move, the federal government re-centralized control over the education system’s payroll back from state governments (González, Rivera, Guerra 2017).

Obtaining a teaching position would now depend on passing a standardized multiple choice exam, evaluating subject knowledge and pedagogical skills. Proponents of the entrance exam argued that it would eliminate widespread nepotistic practices whereby retiring teachers could ‘recommend’ someone, often their son or daughter, for their position, or that it would be awarded as a form of patronage or bribery by SNTE or SEP officials. Opposition from the SNTE and many incumbent teachers had defeated earlier initiatives (Hecock 2014). Despite protests from the CNTE in some states, arguing that the exam was a poor measure of good teaching pedagogy, which would be best assured by directly hiring graduates from teachers’ colleges (the normales) and university faculties of education, the exams were implemented in 2014 (González, Rivera, Guerra 2017).

A further major change meant applicants must hold a degree in their subject area, but were no longer required to be graduates of a university education program or teachers’ college. Eliminating the education degree prerequisite made it easier to fill vacant positions (Mexico City SEP Official 1: Interviewed May 2015). The ability to become a teacher without a degree in education elicited the opposition of many teachers and the CNTE, who argued that it would result in teachers who may be highly knowledgeable about mathematics or science, but with no training in how to run a classroom of young children or adolescents (Mexico City CNTE Leader: Interviewed Feb. 2015; Mexico City Teacher 9: Interviewed Jun. 2015). Some SEP officials have shared this concern. In Mexico City, teachers with education degrees are given first preference for new positions (SEP Official 1: Interviewed May 2015).

The implication that there are no skills intrinsic to teaching that cannot be initially assessed by a multiple choice exam and further developed on the job is a profound degradation

of teachers' professionalism (Hugo Aboites, Interviewed Feb. 2015). It may contribute to a remaking of the self conceptualization of the profession, if a significant proportion enter their career without the socializing experience of four years in teachers' college or a university education program. Historically, the teachers' colleges as residential institutions typically recruiting local students from campesino families, has been a vital source for the construction of teachers' identity in Mexico, and often where new teachers become active in the CNTE (Navarro 2016). The first year the change in degree qualifications came into effect, in 2013-14, enrolment in publicly run normales fell to 73 percent capacity, and 52 percent in private normales (Poy Solano 2016b). By 2018, it had declined to 30 percent in some states (Navarro Saras 2018). According to a former president of Mexico City's largest teachers' college, the normales suffered from "paralysis, financial asphyxiation and academic abandonment." (Poy Solano 2016b) [Author's translation].

The most contentious evaluation for teachers was that which conditioned their continued employment. Every three years, teachers were required to report to an examination centre, where in a computer lab they would complete a multiple choice exam that would measure their teaching competency and upload exemplars of student work and lesson plans. Failure meant being mandated to take professional development courses and trying again the following year. A third failure for existing teachers with 'permanent' status would mean demotion to a non-teaching clerical position, or termination for interim or new teachers.

Throughout the legislation implementing the new teacher evaluations and in public pronouncements from Mexicanos Primero in their support, was an implicit and often explicit claim that these policies were intended to transform public education by marginalizing the

SNTE, which through traditional corporatist labour relations, held considerable power within the system. This was best symbolized by the arrest in February 2013 of Elba Esther Gordillo on charges of corruption (Bensusan & Middlebrook 2013).⁴ Her position was assumed by Juan Diaz de la Torre, who firmly backed Peña Nieto's policies throughout his term.

Opposition to the test from teachers and the CNTE emerged primarily from three bases. First, among teachers who completed the exam, was a widespread view that it was an illegitimate means of assessing their teaching.⁵ To create a national exam with a limited number of subject and grade level variations, questions were necessarily of a generic nature. Education policy experts, including INEE president Sylvia Schmelkes, who was ultimately responsible for overseeing the exams, acknowledged that the format of a multiple choice test was an inferior means to assess teacher capacities, better assessed through classroom observation (Poy Solano 2016a). Second, many teachers and especially the CNTE mistrusted the functioning of the evaluation system, contending that it could be used for political purposes to generate a desired 'pass/fail' rate that could be used to eliminate senior teachers or dissidents. Finally, the CNTE and critical academics stressed how the system eliminates 'permanent' employment status, circumvents collectively bargained processes for discipline and promotion, and is unappealable, exempting teachers from collective rights constitutionally guaranteed to other groups of public employees (González, Rivera, Guerra 2017).

⁴ Her arrest was supported by most teachers (Bensusan & Middlebrook 2013). The CNTE argued she should also be tried for the alleged murder of union dissidents in the late 1980s. After having consistently supported the education reforms of President Calderon and endorsing plans announced by Peña Nieto during his campaign, following the passing of the constitutional amendments, Gordillo had begun to publicly voice concerns (Hernandez Navarro 2013).

⁵ This was the prevailing view among teachers at the two secondary schools where I conducted my doctoral field work between 2015 and 2017.

The CNTE, many teachers and some critical academics have publicly framed Peña Nieto's education policies as an 'administrative' reform' or 'labour reform' that has undermined workers' rights. Contrary to the government and mass media's use of the term 'education reform', they argue that it is not about education, much less improving it, often with an implicit acknowledgement that Mexico's public education system is in need of considerable improvement (CNTE 2013; Aboites 2015; Mexico City Teachers 1 & 2: Interviewed Feb. 2015). Some teachers and school directors I interviewed who were not activists, said they were in favour of 'education reform', but not the 'labour' or 'administrative' reform. They were concerned that the teacher exams were flawed and would make their employment more precarious, but also stressed that they opposed complacency, and that classroom pedagogy had to be improved (Mexico City Teachers 3 & 4: Interviewed Feb. 2015).

While sharing strong criticism of the Servicio Profesional Docente for its impact on the terms of teachers' employment, González, Rivera and Guerra (2017) argue that it also has broader consequences for education, contributing to a more profound neoliberalization of how teachers' work. They describe the reforms as "the configuration of a new regime of political control and the production of new teacher and student subjectivities." (González, Rivera, Guerra 2017: 18) [author's translation]. Drawing on Foucault's theorization on governance and power, they argue that the education reform is a "discursive assemblage", part of a rational process that must be situated within a political context (González, Rivera, Guerra 2017: 23-24). Similar to how Peck (2011) argues that it is more accurate to conceptualize an ongoing neoliberalization of policy and governance rather than discrete neoliberal policies, González, Rivera and Guerra argue that education reform should be understood as a broader process rather than a series of

distinct actions on the part of the state and other actors (2017: 19). They also consider how teachers and critical intellectuals frame the policies to be a question of political strategy:

If the reform is understood only as related to labour, rather than education; if its principal mechanism is understood to be the evaluation of teachers; whether or not it is to improve the quality of education through systematic, standardized tests, who will resist, question it or lead the protests? Teachers, their organizations, their union and its locals first of all, and later in a different form, commentators, analysts and researchers. No one else. The reform is lived as a loss of labour rights, a financial loss. Resistance becomes a trade union issue, and the agents, organizations, strategies and tactics are those worn out and tired from years of quasi-institutionalized protests.
(González, Rivera, Guerra 2017: 18)

Understanding and framing Peña Nieto's reforms as having further reaching consequences on the nature of education beyond the immediate self-interest of teachers, the authors argue, makes it much easier for them to build larger coalitions with parents and local communities. The degree to which Mexican teachers have been able to draw on the socially embedded nature of their work to build these broader alliances has been decisive in determining the success of their protest movements.

The standardized, centralized evaluation of teachers occurs within a broader range of initiatives that increase the control, surveillance and governance of education authorities over teachers' class time, undermining their professional autonomy. At the most literal level, during my visits to two secondary schools in Mexico City between 2015 and 2018, the most advanced technology that I observed and that were identified by teachers, were digital fingerprint scanners that all school employees must press at the start and end of their workday. A further reaching project has been the gradual reorganization of school-level administration. Upon his election, Mexicanos Primero urged Peña Nieto's government to remove school directors and sub

directors⁶ from the SNTE, arguing that doing so was vital to the successful implementation of education reforms, blaming their questionable loyalty to the state and appointment by the union for the failure of past projects (Bocking 2015a). This was done in 2017. Despite the loss of thousands of members as well as considerable influence that this entailed for the union, SNTE leader Diaz de la Torre limited his opposition to expressing concern on how the rights of school directors and sub directors would be protected (Méndez 2017). Under concurrent policies, medium to large primary and secondary schools are staffed with two additional sub-directors, responsible for administration and overseeing academics respectively, recruited through the new exam for promotions, rather than earlier practices of nepotism, appointment by the SNTE or election by their peers (the latter occurred in some districts led by the CNTE (Cook 1996)). School directors and sub directors described their duty of observing teachers in the classroom as primarily to provide formative feedback for new teachers, or those that they have identified to be struggling with their classes (Mexico City Teacher 4: Interviewed Feb. 2015; Mexico City Teacher 8: Interviewed May 2015). Formal discipline is carried out by the next level of administrators, the zone supervisors.⁷ However in subtle forms, school directors are pressed to perform an increasingly managerial role in relation to teacher colleagues, a process referred to by Carter, Stevenson and Passy (2010) as “extended managerialism”. According to Mexico City SEP guidelines since 2015, the monthly full day staff and professional development meetings in which school-wide issues are discussed and longterm plans established, are to be run by school directors, rather than as a more collective collegial process. These meetings are increasingly

⁶ Referred to in Canada and the US as principals and vice principals.

⁷ Zone supervisors are equivalent to local superintendents in Canada or the US.

mandated to focus on pursuing continual improvement of school metrics selected by the SEP, rather than locally identified issues of concern (Mexico City Teacher 6: Interviewed Feb. 2015; González, Rivera, Guerra 2017) With their removal from the union, school directors and sub-directors would likely see their role further shifted towards being a ‘boss’ in relation to teachers, if the trajectory of managerial top-down reforms under Peña Nieto continues under Lopez Obrador.

More zone supervisors have also been hired, now responsible for six rather than ten schools each. They are mandated to more intensively analyze classroom teaching by filming lessons (González, Rivera, Guerra 2017). The Stallings method of classroom observation involves filming the teachers’ activity which is then quantitatively analyzed according to the percentage of time spent in “academic activities” delivering direct instruction or assisting students, “classroom management” which includes marking, taking attendance or distributing papers, or “off task”: chatting with colleagues and students, or being otherwise unengaged with the curriculum (Bruns & Luque 2014).⁸ Previously used in the US, the World Bank introduced the method to Mexico while preparing the report, *Great Teachers: How to Raise Student Learning in Latin America and the Caribbean* (2014) with 15 000 observations across seven countries, with Mexico City representing the nation. The report claimed that Mexico City teachers spent 52 percent of class time involved in academic activities, well below the report’s ‘optimal’ 85 percent, while 39 percent was spent on “classroom management”, and 9 percent was

⁸ Time spent by teachers addressing student (mis)behaviour is not explicitly factored within this breakdown. Likewise, many primary and secondary teachers would contend that “off task” conversation or banter with students is sometimes essential to obtain engagement in academic activities. As one school director stated, for the many students coming from homes with domestic violence, parental separations or lack of money for breakfast, the teacher also often has to act as a social worker (Mexico City Teacher 8: Interviewed May 2015).

“off task” (Bruns & Luque 2014: 11-12).⁹ Their report elicited significant interest from the Mexico City SEP, whose supervisors conducted filmed observations of 40 000 classrooms during the 2015-2016 school year (González, Rivera, Guerra 2017: 141-142). These surveillance methods resemble Stevenson’s (2017) description of the rise of ‘Neo-Taylorism’ as a form of governance over teachers’ work. Teachers’ professional autonomy is undermined and deskilled as their work is analyzed into ‘scientifically quantifiable’ components, fed into a larger ‘datafication’ of their work. As Stevenson argues, “There can be no understanding the work of teachers without understanding the “tyranny of numbers”... Numbers are now central to creating an apparently uncontested truth in which teachers are measured, ranked, judged, and rewarded or punished.” (2017: 550). Absent the power to ‘speak back’ to seemingly objective data, an ‘ideal form’ of pedagogy can then be increasingly prescribed according to a quantitative distillation of ‘best practices’.

One of the final acts of Peña Nieto’s waning government was the implementation of the New Education Model (Nuevo Modelo Educativo), a package of curricular and school programming changes at the start of the 2018-2019 school year. It has been described by dissident teachers and critical academics as “pro business”, with a discursive emphasis on “quality and efficiency” (Estrada 2018). Rivera, González and Guerra (2018) observe that this

⁹ Bruns and Luque also report little use of technology in teaching, with reliance on old fashioned methods: the blackboard and notebooks. As with other problems diagnosed by the authors, they charge that this is due to a lack of innovation or initiative on the part of teachers. In the secondary schools I visited on my fieldwork, the vast majority of classrooms were equipped simply with whiteboards. Computers or digital projectors were rarely present. In a small library (with 300 books in a school of 800 students), the librarian pointed out the high proportion of computers that had been out of order for a considerable period of time, due to little access to technical support from the SEP. Three teachers and a sub director recalled earlier programs to outfit their schools with technology under the Fox government a decade earlier: the new computers worked for a time, but the SEP did not provide for their maintenance or renewal. They were soon obsolete or inoperable (Mexico City Teachers 1, 2, 4 & 6: Interviewed Feb. 2015).

language has been present within Mexican education policy for decades. They note a contradiction between a stated commitment to a humanist education and an apparent utilitarian orientation towards work-readiness, rather than broader human development. Beyond the discourse, subject-area curriculum documents were simplified around ‘Key Learning’ points, while the student course load was restructured more heavily towards Spanish and Math, following the dominant trend of countries focusing on the subject areas tested by the OECD’s international PISA exam (Sellar & Lingard 2013; Addey & Sellar 2017), to the detriment of science, geography and civics (Estrada 2018). So-called “curricular autonomy” entailed the replacement of student elective ‘workshops’ run by teachers as part of their course load, with ‘clubs’. An impressive list of potential clubs are recommended, including the study of local history, Indigenous languages and art, and horticulture; but under the proviso that no additional funding was available for their functioning. As a result, they may be run ‘voluntarily’ by teachers or by external NGOs or businesses, drawing on possibilities for corporate sponsorship and branding (Estrada 2018; Rivera, González, Guerra 2018). Critical teachers and academics see this as a substitution of paid for unpaid, not quite voluntary work. This is highly significant insofar as in contrast to Canada or the US, where teachers are by default granted full time positions, primary teachers in Mexico begin with a recognized workload of 20 hours a week. Nearly all of this is classroom teaching time, with only a few hours of paid preparation time a month, for which they are paid a starting monthly rate of 4000 pesos¹⁰. Secondary teachers are paid at an hourly rate and apply for sets of courses, beginning with 12 or 15 hours a week, and gradually accumulate more over the course of their career (Hernandez, Llamas & Garro 2012:

¹⁰ Equivalent to \$212 US in October 2018 (Source: www.xe.com).

329; González, Rivera, Guerra 2017: 218). Around 10 percent of teachers hold full time hours, defined as between 36 and 42 hours a week (INEE 2015: 56).¹¹ The New Education Model exemplifies the multi-faceted effects of contemporary neoliberal education policy on teachers' work and schools, as it appears to increase their precarious employment, despite discourse on improving educational quality.

Teachers' Resistance During Enrique Peña Nieto's Sexenio

The CNTE and allied dissident teachers' movements responded to the implementation of Peña Nieto's constitutional amendments mandating standardized evaluations with a wave of protests and strikes of varying lengths, in 27 of Mexico's 32 states at the start of the 2013-2014 school year (Aboites 2015; Bocking 2015a). Hundreds of thousands of teachers participated, many in states not previously known for dissident organizing, such as Veracruz and Jalisco. However the strengths and weaknesses of a movement largely structured at the state level emerged within the 'national' CNTE. While teachers in Guerrero began striking in the spring of 2013, their colleagues in other states waited until August or September (Lucia Rivera & Marcelino Guerra: Interviewed Mar. 2018). The mobilizations initially won vaguely termed concessions by November 2013 from state governments where the CNTE's strength was traditionally most concentrated in Oaxaca, Chiapas, Michoacan and Guerrero. The movement hoped these state-level exemptions would undermine the viability of the national evaluation policy. Instead, by early 2014 all states had reneged on their agreements under legal pressure

¹¹ Primary and secondary school class sizes in Mexico were about double the average of the OECD in 2015 (Andrade 2015). Secondary level classes typically held around 40 to 45 students in the two Mexico City schools I observed.

from the federal government which argued that they were in abeyance of the national constitution (Bocking 2018). In some states where the CNTE had accumulated a considerable institutional presence, the reversal went further. In Oaxaca, hundreds of staff appointed with the influence of the CNTE were purged from the central office of the state secretary of education (La Botz 2015).

The first round of exams for applicants to teaching positions began in 2014, facing protests and blockades led by the CNTE in a handful of states, but proceeding without disruption in the vast majority of sites. Implementation of the exam for existing teachers in 2015 met far more resistance, both organized and spontaneous. With the threat of firing for not participating, the vast majority of the selected teachers attended the evaluation centres, but protests, technical glitches, logistical problems and alleged sabotage occurred at such a rate as to disrupt the INEE's timetable for evaluating nearly 1.5 million teachers within three years (ie. by 2017-2018) (Bocking 2018). In February 2016, the SEP announced that 3000 teachers would be fired for not participating, primarily from Michoacan, Guerrero and Oaxaca, and 3119 more would be fired for more than three absences due to strikes against the exam (González, Rivera, Guerra 2017: 159, 176).¹²

The threats of termination helped detonate a new escalation of resistance from May 15 to August of 2016 with protests and strikes (most for less than three days at a time) across the country, but especially in the CNTE's traditional strongholds. Tens of thousands of education

¹² Peña Nieto's government introduced at the same time as the standardized teachers' evaluation a policy that SEP employees with more than three unexcused absences in a month would be fired, without subject to appeal. The measure was intended to discourage strikes (Mexico City SEP Official 1: Interviewed May 2015). Virtually all teachers' strikes in Mexico are illegal, as is the case in most sectors. Following declaration of the intention to strike, a tripartite board consisting of government, business and official (ie. corporatist) union representatives rule on its legitimacy (Bensusan & Middlebrook 2013).

employees had also experienced months long delays in the payment of their salaries since the SEP's payroll was uploaded to the national level (Bocking 2015b). Teachers and their allies were further galvanized following the massacre by police of 11 supporters who were blockading a road in protest at the town of Nochixtlán, Oaxaca on June 19 (McDonnell 2016; Hernandez 2016). The violent incident was the pivotal moment that delegitimized Peña Nieto's education reform in the minds of many Mexicans. It also drew international attention to the movement, particularly from teachers' unions in Canada, the US and the UK. Soon afterwards, a large minority of Mexico City's primary teachers, and a smaller group of secondary teachers, began short walkouts, considerably strengthening the movement which had previously lacked active participation in the nation's second largest school system (Mexico City Teachers 6 & 7: Interviewed Nov. 2016). They received moral and logistical support from the Morena party, which rallied its supporters to join teachers in a hundred thousand strong march in the capital (Bocking 2018). While the SEP met with the official leadership of the SNTE and offered a modest salary increase, the Interior Ministry met with the CNTE, and agreed to make the evaluation voluntary, except for those who had previously failed it. This was a major victory for the movement, leading González, Rivera and Guerra (2017) to caution that other aspects of Peña Nieto's reform (described above) remained in place. The fate of 586 teachers ultimately fired for striking also remained unresolved (Poy Solano 2018a).

The Teachers' Movement and the SNTE at the Inauguration of the Morena Government

The victories of the CNTE in 2016 were facilitated by, and helped strengthen the emergence of new pockets of dissident teachers in Guadalajara and in other cities and states

where the movement had historically been weak (Lucia Rivera & Marcelino Guerra: Interviewed Mar. 2018). Yet much of the 2013 upsurge in Veracruz, one of Mexico's most populous states and previously a bastion of the PRI and corporatist unionism, later succumbed to division from competing leaders and an unusual structure of multiple state-level teachers' unions (Veracruz CNTE Activist: Interviewed Apr. 2018). Yet teacher activists were important in Morena's gubernatorial victory here in 2018 (Ávila 2018). Due to stronger disciplinary capacities of the local SEP administration and organizational division between primary and secondary teachers among other factors, the CNTE was unable to consolidate its base with secondary teachers in Mexico City, but the movement's leadership of primary teachers in the city is still widely recognized (Bocking 2018). Overall the movement has largely been unable to build a dominant position in new areas, capable of taking power from the pro-institutional forces within the union. Juan Díaz de la Torre and his allies still appeared to hold a tight grip on power in the majority of state sections and at the national level of the SNTE. This was demonstrated by their continued success in fixing the results of state-level union executive elections that were projected to have been otherwise won by CNTE supporters (Valadez Rodríguez 2016; Catalán Lerma 2018). Yet Díaz de la Torre faced a new challenge from an old face. Elba Esther Gordillo received a pardon from Peña Nieto's attorney general in July 2018, after over five years of imprisonment and house arrest. Gordillo immediately made her claim to be the true leader of the SNTE, opposing the existing "traitors", who she argued had not defended the union's membership. "I didn't suffer alone, the teachers of Mexico also suffered," she said (La Jornada 2018). Her actual level of support among rank and file teachers was unclear. Gordillo and her allies positioned themselves as allies of Lopez Obrador and Morena, both as a rebuke to Peña Nieto whose party had

imprisoned (but ultimately freed) her, and especially in recognition of the new alignment of power, much as she had done in the 2000s with the ascendant National Action Party (PAN) (Cano 2018).

Gordillo's attempted alignment was challenged by the concurrent claim of her unequivocal enemies, the leaders and activists of the CNTE, of interest in working with Lopez Obrador's government at the start of his presidency. During the gubernatorial races in the year prior to the national election, especially in populous Estado de México which was narrowly won by the PRI over Morena, the CNTE cautiously adopted a new policy allowing state sections to determine their electoral involvement, within a broad mandate of defeating the PRI, PAN and PRD. In practice this meant supporting Morena (Abott 2018). To avoid co-option by political parties within Mexico's corporatist labour relations system as well as internal sectarianism, the CNTE had historically maintained a stance of no electoral involvement, and occasionally anti-electoral activity (Cook 1996; Hernandez Navarro 2012; La Botz 2015; Bocking 2015b). During the 2017 gubernatorial race in the Estado de México, CNTE support was prominent, with the movement hosting a rally with three thousand teachers for Morena's candidate days before the vote. Earlier in the day, Gordillo's supporters within the SNTE held a separate rally with half the turnout (Hernández López 2017). The election of Morena placed Juan Diaz de la Torre in a difficult position, having loyally defended Peña Nieto's neoliberal reforms during his entire term. The new Morena government pledged to dismantle their predecessor's 'punitive' teacher evaluation scheme (Martínez 2018). Subsequently, Diaz de la Torre claimed to have identified "inconsistencies" and "legal deficiencies" in the application of Peña Nieto's education policies, that his union would challenge (Villalobos 2018).

The CNTE's cautious support for Lopez Obrador is premised on his campaign statements that his government would develop a "constructive" rather than "punitive" relationship with teachers. As a gesture of good faith, the CNTE voted to formally participate in a series of public forums on the future direction of education in Mexico hosted by the new education secretary (Méndez 2018). Many activists with the CNTE personally supported Lopez Obrador's earlier attempts at the presidency in 2006 and 2012. However it is relatively easy for the CNTE to have good relations with Morena at this juncture, as the party's experience in government effectively began in 2018. It had not yet had the opportunity to compromise on its principles. Morena appears to owe no debts to Juan Diaz de la Torre or Mexicanos Primero. However immediately after clinching his election night victory, Lopez Obrador met with Mexico's most important corporate interest group, the Business Coordinating Council (CCE), (led by the father of the director of Mexicanos Primero) and gave assurances of his interest in protecting and supporting private enterprise (La Botz 2018). Critics on the left point to his record as mayor of Mexico City in the 2000s, as evidence of the limits of how far he will likely challenge the neoliberal status quo (Müller 2016). While expanding social programs and public post secondary education, his administration left largely intact the PRI's corporatist labour relations system favouring the old party-aligned company unions, making it extremely difficult for genuine unions to receive legal recognition and compel employers to negotiate (La Botz 2018). Many CNTE activists were skeptical of whether Lopez Obrador's government was interested in a real rupture on education policy from his predecessors. However at the start of his presidency, a majority believed it represented an opening for the teachers' movement and their allies to hold his government to its more progressive promises, and that a new space had been created to push forward an alternative

vision (Escalante 2018; Mexico City Teacher 7: Interviewed Sep. 2018; Mexico City Labour Activist: Interviewed Oct. 2018).

Conclusion

Two decades into the Twenty-First Century, Mexico's independent labour movement remains weak. While struggling against challenges related to globalization familiar to workers around the world, Mexican unions exist within a national context where legal structures favouring state-aligned and company controlled unions received very modest reforms only recently in 2017, to provide fairer ground for independent unions. Might still often makes right, as employers and corrupt unions resort to violence against labour activists, with the complicity or connivance of authorities. Meanwhile, poverty grew during the tenure of Peña Nieto. At the start of the 2018-2019 school year, 56 percent of primary and secondary schools were located in communities with high or very high rates of poverty, which disproportionately served Indigenous children in rural areas. Many of the facilities used by these students lacked basic infrastructure, including water, reliable electricity, and basic classroom materials (Poy Solano 2018b). At the same time, the insecurity caused by the drug cartels escalated, in many cases embedding itself within the state, resulting in the abduction of 43 student-teachers in September 2014 from the radical Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College in Guerrero. The teachers' movement led by the CNTE exists as nearly the only section of organized labour in Mexico with the capacity to wage large scale, militant struggles.

Yet the country is alive with community-based social movements, of Indigenous peoples and farmers fighting for their land against expropriation for mega projects and resource

extraction, or urban neighbourhoods organized to demand public services including water, garbage collection, transit, and adequate schools for their children. Perhaps a large part of how the teachers' movement remains by far the most active and militant part of Mexico's labour movement is that in the states where it carries the most influence, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guerrero and Michoacan, it is closely and organically connected to these organized struggles (Bellinghausen 2016; Bocking 2018). Structurally, the basic education system is by far the most important part of the 'social' state in most people's lives (with the patchwork nature of public healthcare, for example), reaching across the nation in a relatively consistent fashion. From this and its iconic role in modern Mexican history, public education, and its' teachers have great symbolic significance. Many have attributed the CNTE's relative success and longevity to longterm alliances with parents and community organizations, which see teachers as their allies against an uncaring and corrupt state, relationships able to withstand the hardships of strikes at their children's schools (Monsivais 1987; Cook 1996; Hernandez Navarro 2012).

While the desire for a better future for their children is universal, and the inadequacies of the existing public education system are painfully evident, there remains a high degree of skepticism within Mexican popular culture when business and state elites citing PISA test scores, claim the best way forward is through privatization and the subordination of teachers. Teachers in Mexico, as elsewhere, have been strongest in taking on the neoliberalization of education where they can credibly argue that the defence of their professional autonomy, as with the defeat of standardized evaluations that do not meaningfully assess teaching, is in the public interest. It is likely that the Morena government will abandon Peña Nieto's policies that have most served as the lightning rod of discontent for teachers, the standardized evaluation on which their

employment rests. But challenging the broader neoliberalization of education will likely require the sustained mobilization of Mexico's teachers to challenge the dominant 'common sense' centred on alignment with business-driven metrics, management structures and discourse, that rationalizes their precarious employment and the gradual erosion of their professional autonomy. To draw the support of Mexico's politically active poor and working class communities, the movement must also include an alternative, humanistic and democratic vision for the present and future of the nation's students.

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