

# MESOAMERICA

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## GUATEMALA

### **Striking Teachers Clog Roads**

On 25 Apr, thousands of public school teachers blocked some of Guatemala's main roads, halting traffic for miles, to protest unfair policies, corruption and privatization of the education system in Guatemala. The disgruntled teachers said that if their demands were not met they would strike again on 2 May.

Traffic to and from the Mexican border was completely interrupted on the Inter-American highway. The teachers also blocked the main highways to the Pacific and the Atlantic ports, roads that lead to the border with El Salvador and Honduras, and other important routes.

The latest action was part of a labor dispute that has been growing in recent months. Earlier, the teachers held a three-day strike that ended on 25 Mar with a settlement between the Berger administration and National Teachers Assembly (ANM). An estimated 83,000 public school teachers, 95% of Guatemalan teachers, were on strike and resumed classes when the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) agreed to organize a multi-sector commission to create wide-ranging reforms to the country's Education Law.

Included in the agreement was the promise of new basic supplies for every public pre-school and elementary school, including textbooks and writing materials, and an 8% salary increase for teachers by 20 Apr. On 19 Apr, ANM leaders rejected the 8% increase and demanded 16%, saying that all teachers would walk out if their demands were not met, adding that the 25 Mar agreement reached with MINEDUC was not progressing as promised.

According to the most recent data from MINEDUC, the average salary for a Guatemalan public school teacher is \$121 a month.

During the protests, many of the teachers were arrested for blocking the highways. The director of the National Police, Julio Hernandez, reported that the teachers were arrested for refusing to open passage on the highway that leads to Port Quetzal, about 56 miles south of the capital. According to press reports, the police also utilized tear gas to clear striking teachers from the roadways, which resulted in some of the teachers needing medical attention.

Just as they had threatened, on 2 May, thousands of teachers again took to the streets, this time mostly in the capital, Guatemala City. Delegations from 22 departments took part in the peaceful protest.

Meetings were scheduled between the government and ANM on 6 and 7 May to resolve the standoff and reopen the schools. However, ANM leader Joviel Acevedo said that they will continue the strikes until the demands for salary hikes and essential needs of students are met.

### **Arrests and Purges Over Murder Plot**

Guatemalan police captured another suspect in the 19 Feb slaying of three Salvadoran legislators and their driver near Guatemala City. The suspect, an alleged drug trafficker, is National Civil Police (PCN) agent Wagner Amilcar Morales Silva, who, on 19 Apr, was arrested during a raid in the municipality of Flores, in the northern Petén department, about 125 miles south of Guatemala City.

The murders, which ignited a scandal about corruption in the Guatemalan police, were part of a series of slayings involving officials from both El Salvador and Guatemala in Feb '07. The murdered Salvadorans, all members of the Central American Parliament, were found dead on a rural Guatemalan road. Autopsies showed that two of the lawmakers were burned alive while the driver and the third lawmaker were first killed then set ablaze (Vol. 26, No. 3).

The initial investigation by Guatemalan authorities led to the quick arrest of four PCN agents who were captured a few days after the murders and then assassinated while in custody at El Boquerón prison, which critics denounced as a cover up.

These recent events have led to a dramatic restructuring and “cleansing” of the PCN by Guatemalan authorities. In Mar two high-ranking government officials resigned over fallout from the incidents (Vol. 26, No. 4). On 6 Apr, a new director and assistant director were chosen from within the ranks to head the PCN. The new director, Julio Roberto Hernandez Chávez, with 23 years of police experience, replaces Erwin Sperisen who resigned on 26 Mar. Henry López, with more than 20 years of experience, was named as assistant director.

In addition, in order to maintain the appearance of getting tough on the PCN, 561 police officers were discharged on 24 Apr for “very serious infractions,” according to police spokeswoman Olimpia Piñeda, adding that there will be more dismissals to come very soon.

### **Election Race Heats Up**

The next general elections are to be held on 9 Sep to choose a new president, vice-president, 158 members of Congress and representatives to the Central American Parliament. The Supreme Electoral Court (TSE) officially opened the race on 4 May. While the list of candidates is growing (20 parties and 16 presidential candidates), so are the allegations of fraud, scandal and political violence in these last few months before the elections.

On 29 Apr, former Gen. Otto Pérez Molina and former rebel Miguel Angel Sandoval each succeeded in winning their respective parties' presidential nominations. Pérez, a candidate of the right-wing Patriotic Party, formerly was head of military intelligence and a graduate of the infamous School of the Americas; he was also a signatory to the peace accords that ended Guatemala's 36-year civil war in Dec '96. Angel Sandoval of the National Revolutionary Unity Party, an officialized offshoot of

the defunct guerrilla movement, was a founder of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor and also was part of the '96 peace negotiations with the government.

The present ruling party, the Grand National Alliance (GAN), has chosen Alejandro Giammattei as the successor to current President Óscar Berger Perdomo. GAN, a coalition of three right-wing parties formed in '03, is hoping to be the first party to win reelection in Guatemala. Giammattei headed Guatemala's penal system until Dec, where he was pivotal in regaining control of the nation's largest prison from organized crime gangs (Vol. 25, No 10).

However, the run up to the elections has been fraught with violence for some in the political arena. The center-left National

Unity of Hope (UNE) party has had its fair share of the pain thus far due to the assassination of many of its members. Of more than 20 politicians or activists murdered this year, 16 have been from UNE. The party's presidential candidate, and currently the favorite in the polls to win, Alvero Colom, has said that, despite the violence, he hopes for a "clean, civil election, with a transparent process and sound discussion."

The candidacy of '92 Nobel Peace Prize winner and presidential hopeful Rigoberta Menchú Tum, of Encounter for Guatemala (EG), has had other troubles. EG has faced opposition from other political parties that have attempted to get the TSE to declare it an illegal entity under an obscure regulation, which has made it difficult for EG to finalize its requirements before the 4 May opening. However, on 2 May, the TSE gave Menchú the green light. After the decision she optimistically stated: "the people will freely decide for whom to vote, and that vote will be conscientious and without manipulation." Recent polls show her candidacy to be in fourth place with 5.6 % of the anticipated vote.

Not to be left out, while ineligible to run for president, former military dictator Efraín Ríos-Montt is making a bid for Congress in the Sep elections and was formally nominated by his party, the Guatemalan Republican Front, on 29 Apr. The retired general, in power during '83-'84, is currently avoiding prosecution by a Spanish court for crimes committed during the Guatemalan civil war, including genocide and crimes against humanity. Many international leaders, including 31 US lawmakers, have appealed to the Guatemalan Attorney General to have Ríos-Montt prosecuted and consequently barred from running for public office. If elected, he would potentially be immune from prosecution for his alleged crimes.

On 1 May, the Permanent Representative of Guatemala to the Organization of American States (OAS), Ambassador Francisco Villagrán de León, signed an agreement with OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza to dispatch a team to observe the 9 Sep general elections in Guatemala. Underscoring the importance of the agreement, Insulza noted the solid tradition and respect for OAS Electoral Observation Missions during previous Guatemalan elections. He recalled that, with this mission, the OAS will have monitored five electoral processes in Guatemala since '96, when the peace accords were implemented.

### **High Corn Prices Threaten Hunger**

The UN has reported that hundreds of thousands of people in drought prone areas of Guatemala could face a hunger-crisis if the price of corn continues to rise.

As world corn prices continue to soar due to the recent push for ethanol production, the main staple of the Guatemalan diet is reaching costs that are prohibitive to most of its citizens. Compounding this problem is a drought that is affecting this year's corn crop, which could mean a much smaller yield in the next growing cycle.

According to Ian Cherret, head of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Guatemala, "the increase in the price of maize has left this sector of the population much more vulnerable than they were before...and weather affecting crops is increasingly unpredictable due to climate change."

According to the UN, children under five in Guatemala are chronically malnourished. This is the highest rate in the Western Hemisphere and sixth highest in the world.

On Guatemala's border with Honduras, where some of the poorest towns in the country lie, the price of corn is reportedly already endangering the lives of many children. Many Mayan farm workers and their families in this area are most vulnerable because of the lack of land to grow food on, and as such are subject to the rising market prices of the staple.

The growing demand for ethanol is partly to blame for the danger. The environmentally friendly fuel promoted by the US government as a way to reduce oil imports has pushed international corn prices to near 10-year highs.

The Berger administration has created programs aiming to boost corn output by doling out drought-resistant seeds and fertilizers, and has claimed to make combating hunger a national priority.

According to FAO food and hunger expert Jean Ziegler, three-quarters of all arable land is owned by about two percent of the population and food prices are growing faster than real wages in Guatemala.

—*Jason Howd*