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By John Ross

Overview of the exceptional extent and intensity of class confrontation going on in Mexico beneath the election circus. From Counterpunch: <http://www.counterpunch.org/ross07012006.html>

'Mexico on the Brink : there's a riot going on'

By JOHN ROSS

Mexico City, Mexico.

The furious mob lays siege to the Senate building here. Rocks fly and riot police wielding truncheons wade into the boiling crowd. Sirens scream throughout the old quarter of this conflictive capital. An army tank positions itself above the esplanade and turns its cannon towards the protestors. Special Forces troops in camou wave snub-nosed machine guns at frightened onlookers, warning them to get back. A man in a beret with a bullhorn assures the bystanders that there is no cause for panic. It's all a Hollywood movie. "Vantage Point II", an updated version of the old presidential assassination classic, starring Dennis Quaid and Forest Whitaker amongst other idols of the silver screen, which was on shoot last week in Mexico City's Centro Historico.

But to many jittery residents of the neighborhood like café proprietor Carlos Diaz, "Vantage Point II" looked a lot like a dress rehearsal for what could happen after the July 2nd presidential election here. "I hope it's only a movie" Diaz muses to a regular patron.

Despite outgoing president Vicente Fox's avowal that Mexico is "at peace", it doesn't really look that way. As the tightest presidential election in its 196-year history comes down to the wire, the nation is wracked by a spasm of violent social confrontation.

Item--On April 21st, a thousand elite state and federal police descended upon a striking steel plant in Lazaro Cardenas Michoacan, firing tear gas and live ammunition wildly. But 600 strikers fought back with slingshots and iron ore pellets and drove the police off with heavy machinery. Two young workers were killed in the melee, inflaming a usually quiescent Mexican labor movement. The strike at the Villacero steel plant, Latin America's largest steel bar manufacturer, continues in its fourth month.

The violence in Michoacan came after outgoing president Vicente Fox's labor secretary ordered the longtime leader of the national miners' union to which the steelworkers pertain, removed from office and a reputed flunky for the mine owners installed. The move was seen as Fox government retaliation after Napoleon Gomez Urrutia led a nationwide wildcat strike to protest the death of 65 miners in a northern Mexico coal pit. In addition to Michoacan, workers in Sonora have shut down the nation's largest copper mines and tensions are on the rise in the region.

Now a coalition of maverick unions whose memberships total in the millions, have called for an indefinite strike to protest Fox's intervention in sacrosanct union autonomy. Last month, the coalition, led by the National Workers Union (UNT) and telephone union boss Francisco Hernandez Juarez, shut down key services for an hour in solidarity with the miners. The "indefinite" strike is set to begin June 28th four days before the presidential election and could impact vital communication systems.

Item--On June 15th, thousands of striking school teachers in the southern state of Oaxaca encamped in the central plaza of the state capitol were dislodged by a coordinated police attack that left 100 teachers injured, two of them wounded by gun fire--there are unconfirmed reports of two deaths. Police claim they found a cache of automatic weapons in the union headquarters--the union charges a frame-up. Hours after the security forces occupied the plaza, which is considered a world patrimony site by the United Nations, the "maestros", members of the militant Section 22 of the National Education Workers Union regrouped and took the square back - where they remain behind stout barricades.

The teachers have been on strike for a month demanding cost of living increases and educational improvements in this majority Indian state. The strikers have called upon Oaxaca struggle groups to form an autonomous popular assembly, which is now meeting behind the barricades in the capital.

The union is also demanding the resignation of Governor Ulises Ruiz, a member of the once-ruling Institutional Revolution Party (PRI) and a stalwart confederate of PRI presidential standard-bearer Roberto Madrazo. Oaxaca is a PRI bastion and the striking teachers are urging members not to vote July 2nd and have threatened to disrupt the electoral machinery. About a quarter of Oaxaca's polling places are in schools shuttered by the strike and teachers have intermittently blocked access to the Oaxaca offices of Mexico's maximum electoral authority, the Federal Electoral Institute. Governor Ruiz has called for the intervention of the federal police and the IFE is on red alert.

Item--It is now seven weeks since the brutal assault by state and federal police on machete-wielding farmers in San Salvador Atenco just outside Mexico City in which two young men were killed, hundreds beaten and jailed, and at least 23 women either raped or sexually abused by the invading security forces. Although protests of the atrocities have now spread to 34 countries and Atenco has become a world-wide symbol of Mexico's flagrant disregard for human rights, impunity reigns--23 low-ranking police "officers" accused of abuse have been rewarded with "amparos" (injunctions) that protect them from being jailed. Meanwhile, police continue to ratchet up tensions by patrolling Atenco and 13 surrounding communities and the IFE concedes that setting up polling stations could trigger another round of rioting.

The farmers of Atenco are allied with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and its "Other Campaign", an anti-electoral effort aimed at building a national alliance of underclass struggle groups to, as EZLN mouthpiece Subcomandante Marcos (now doing business as Delegate Zero) explains it, "peacefully overthrow the government."

Marcos has been barnstorming the Mexican outback for months, preaching "peaceful" class war and encouraging local rebellion. Sub Zero's swipes at the political parties and their candidates, particularly leftist front-runner Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and his Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) have tested Mexico's free speech limits. As Election Day nears, the bad blood between the PRD and the Other Campaign has grown thicker.

Pledged to camp out in Mexico City until the government releases 26 prisoners taken at Atenco, Marcos and the "Otra" have lost visibility as the election blitz and football-soccer's World Cup hullabaloo cranks up. Marches and meetings in defense of Atenco have been reduced to radicalized high school and university students, some of whom fly the portrait of Joe Stalin at public gatherings, and the Other Campaign seems to have run out of steam.

Nonetheless, some Otra groups are reportedly planning to "interfere" with the July 2nd balloting although what such interference might consist of is unclear. Marcos is said to have frowned on the action. In Chiapas elections, the Zapatistas have sometimes dismantled polling stations and burnt ballot boxes.

But its not just Atenco or Oaxaca. "Focos Rojos" (red bulbs) are flashing all over Mexico's electoral map. San Blas Atempa on the Oaxaca isthmus is a potential Atenco as state authorities threaten to crush a local autonomous council that has the support of the Zapatistas' Other Campaign. On the fringes of Mexico City, gangs of "ruterros" or freelance bus drivers battle savagely for hours over turf and police are powerless to intervene. The narco wars rage in Mexican cities with five beheadings in Tijuana last week rivaling Baghdad on a bad day--such bloodshed does not help to turn out the vote. If Mexico had won the World Cup the streets would have been filled with riotous jubilation but now that the national team has been eliminated, frustration could tripwire angry street rioting.

The tensions are openly exploited by Mexico's two-headed television monolith, Televisa and TV Azteca. Primetime newscasts zoom in on sensationalist footage of violent confrontations like Atenco and Oaxaca as commentators seek to associate the discontent with the leftist Lopez Obrador. Right-wing candidate Felipe Obrador deluges the screen with Get Lopez Obrador spots, sometimes four in a single commercial break, that label the leftist a danger to Mexico in a not-so-veiled scheme to incite the so-called "vote of fear"--in 1994, after the Zapatistas rose and PRI candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio was gunned down in Tijuana, Ernesto Zedillo rode the fear vote to big numbers.

The left daily La Jornada reports that the IFE has flagged 43 out of 300 electoral districts as hot spots where local conflicts could impede voting July 2nd. Criteria for IFE alarm include social instability, public insecurity, and battling between political parties.

But the biggest trouble could come not on Election Day but the day after if a closely fought vote is not resolved quickly and cleanly to the satisfaction of the participants. With Lopez Obrador and Felipe Calderon still nose to nose and the PAN's attack ads flying, emotions on both sides are peaking.

The consensus of the pundits is that although Lopez Obrador has pulled ahead by three points in late polling, this is still a very close election that could be decided by a 100,000 votes or less out of an expected 43,000,000 ballots cast and the IFE, which in the last days of the campaign has been lacerated by charges of favoritism and cooking the vote, will be in the eye of the storm.

Should Lopez Obrador be denied victory, a conclusion that his followers are not likely to swallow, or should the system "collapse" as it did in 1988 to deny leftist Cuauhtemoc Cardenas victory, or if the numbers come up slow with no clear winner emerging for days, Lopez Obrador's people, with or without their fearless leader, will go into the streets. And it won't be a movie.

John Ross is in Mexico City waiting to see How It All Comes Down so that he can finish his latest cult classic "Making Another World Possible--Zapatista Chronicles 2000-2006" to be published by Nation Books this October.