

'Brexit' and the Democracy Myth

Exclusive: A referendum like Brexit can be a satisfying moment for an angry populace to vent its frustrations but “yes or no” answers to complex questions can be dangerous for democracy, explains Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

There's a theory going around that referenda are the ultimate in direct democracy. There's something about masses of people voting for or against some major issue that causes would-be populists to go weak in the knees. But the theory is pure myth, as the Brexit debacle shows. Rather than raising democracy to a new level, referenda often drag it down.

The classic example occurred in the early 1850s when Napoleon III, nephew of the more famous Napoleon I, engineered back-to-back plebiscites that allowed him to institute a dictatorship for nearly 20 years. Instead of democracy, France got the opposite – political prisoners by the thousands, foreign adventures, and a disastrous war with Germany.

More recently, there is California's system of “initiative and referendum” that was supposed to usher in a glorious age of progress back in 1911, but has instead allowed an endless parade of conservative business interests to manipulate state politics and bend them to their will.

There's also a long-forgotten 1973 referendum on Northern Irish independence that, as the London *Independent's* estimable Patrick Cockburn recently pointed out, “did nothing except exacerbate hatred and convince the losing side that they had no alternative except violence.”

There's also the 2005 U.S.-engineered constitutional referendum in Iraq that, according to Cockburn, “turned out to be one more stepping stone towards civil war.”

There's last June's farcical Greek referendum on the European Commission's budget bailout proposals in which a resounding 61-39 no vote somehow provided the Syriza government with a mandate to say yes to everything the E.C. demanded.

And now there's Brexit in which a 52-48 vote in favor of leaving the European Union has left the United Kingdom's political classes feeling dazed and confused. Scotland, which voted heavily in favor of staying put inside the U.K. in 2014, is once again pushing for independence as a consequence of Brexit, while Sinn Fein, which is also pro-E.U., is calling on Northern Ireland to leave the U.K. and join up with the republic to the south (possible consequences

unanticipated by many Brexit supporters).

Ultra-rightists are, meanwhile, pushing for similar leave-the-E.U. referenda in Denmark, the Netherlands, Italy, Slovakia and Poland, suggesting that the great E.U. sundering may have only just begun. It's a massive snafu that has apparently left many "leave" supporters with a serious case of buyer's remorse.

Democratic Breakdown

But how did this happen? Brexit is a milestone in an ongoing process of democratic breakdown taking place on both sides of the Atlantic. Britain has all the symptoms of the disease in its final stages, not just advanced income polarization and a runaway financial sector, but a privileged political class that is increasingly detached from the masses below and a Parliament that is increasingly unrepresentative.

Fifty or 60 years ago, for example, 90 percent or more of the British electorate voted either Conservative or Labour. The percentage has fallen to just 67.3 percent as of last year thanks to the rise of smaller parties like the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrats, but the duopoly still winds up with 85 percent of the seats.

Even though Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron commands a solid parliamentary majority, he heads up what was in fact a minority government backed by just 36 percent of the electorate. Conversely, the upstart U.K. Independence Party took home 13 percent of the vote in 2015, yet wound up with just one seat out of 650. If Cameron was weaker than he appeared, UKIP was stronger.

For those who despise UKIP and the right-wing xenophobia it stands for, this was a result they could live with. But it was unsustainable. Desperate to keep UKIP out and thereby preserve his own parliamentary majority, Cameron made his pact with the devil by agreeing to hold a referendum on the subject of the E.U.

Out of touch with popular opinion, the Prime Minister figured that he could have his cake and eat it too by portraying himself as a down-home populist while resting secure in the belief that the status quo would prevail.

Needless to say, he miscalculated. By shutting UKIP out, he provided it with an extra-parliamentary field from which to mount an assault on Westminster's two-party dictatorship. The offensive succeeded beyond all expectations, resulting in one of the most stunning political upsets in the U.K.'s post-World War II history.

Now consider what might have happened had Parliament been more representative.

With not just 13 percent of the vote but 13 percent of the seats, UKIP might well have succeeded in maneuvering the Conservatives, with their large Euro-skeptic wing, into adopting an explicit anti-E.U. stance. But even if UKIP had prevailed, chances are it would not have done so for long.

Parliament would have been forced to thrash the issue out in full, and if it still voted to leave, it would always have the option of reversing itself at some later date. Once the battle had been fought, the Remain camp might eventually have emerged all the stronger by virtue of its long march through the trenches.

Addressing Reform

But this would have required thoroughgoing constitutional reform aimed at rendering Parliament more equitable. Constitutional reform was once a hot topic in Britain, but it suffered a long and lingering death under Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair. Instead of wrestling with the problem democratically, Cameron opted for a pseudo-democratic referendum.

He thought it was an easy way out since the vote was sure to go his way. Now that it hasn't, politicians are searching desperately for a solution. But short of a miracle, one is unlikely to be found.

None of this is to say that Brexit is incorrect. With the E.U. turning into an iron cage of neoliberalism and bureaucracy, powerful arguments can be made both pro or con. But a referendum is a disaster because it leaves the British people with no obvious recourse.

If the decision turns out to be wrong, then, short of a revolutionary transformation of British politics, it deprives the people of the ability to correct their own error. It robs the people of their own sovereignty, presuming such a thing can be said to exist in Britain's antiquated constitutional system.

Oh those silly Brits with their bewigged judges and outmoded monarchy! Aren't Americans lucky that they're so much more up to date?

But Americans are not. Take Britain's sclerotic political institutions and multiply them by a hundred and you may begin to get an idea of how politics have fallen in the two-century-old oligarchical republic known as the United States.

Where to begin? There's a Senate that is perhaps the most unrepresentative major legislative body on earth, one that grants equal representation to lily-white Wyoming and to multi-racial California even though the latter's population is some 67 times greater. There's a House of Representatives that, thanks to the

miracle of gerrymandering, has come under a semi-permanent Republican dictatorship.

There's an Electoral College that not only exaggerates the clout of Wyoming, Montana, and other under-populated Western states but forces presidential candidates to concentrate on winning over half a dozen swing states while ignoring the rest. There's gridlock that now extends not just to Congress but to the Supreme Court. And there's a political class that is far more detached and corrupt than anything poor little Britain has to offer.

Founding Flaws

These are all products of structural errors that the supposedly infallible Founding Fathers put in place. It's not necessarily their fault. After all, they were practical politicians wrestling with problems that were all but overwhelming. But the one of the worst things they did was to create an amending clause in Article V that requires approval by two-thirds of each house plus three-fourths of the states to change so much as a comma.

Again, it wasn't necessarily their fault since a tight restriction on constitutional change was necessary to seal the package and see it through to ratification. (An obvious exception was the so-called "Bill of Rights," the first ten amendments that were demanded by some critics of the Constitution and were promptly ratified.)

But more than two centuries later, the amendment process is a disaster. Whereas the three-fourths rule allowed four states accounting for as little as ten percent of the population to block any constitutional amendment in 1790, today it grants total veto power to just 13 states accounting for as little as 4.4 percent.

Given today's partisanship and the quasi-mystical view of the Constitution as some sort of divine document, the barriers to change are all but insurmountable. This is why – not counting the 27th Amendment regarding changes to compensation of members of Congress, which was written in 1788 but not ratified until 1992 – there have been no constitutional amendments since 1971, a 45-year constitutional dry spell exceeded only by the dry spell that preceded the Civil War (another time of bitter political infighting – over slavery and the balance of power between the federal government and the states).

In today's political environment, the three-fourths rule locks in the Founders' errors and makes the simplest correction impossible. Take the Second Amendment, 27 words dating from 1791 that everyone claims to understand but which are in fact indecipherable.

If no one knows for certain what a “well-regulated militia” means, what it has to do with “the right to bear arms,” or even whether “bear arms” means a personal right to carry a gun or was meant by the authors to state the right of citizens to participate in a militia, then the obvious answer is to issue a clarification.

That’s what happens when a journalist turns in copy that is muddled and unclear or when a government agency issues a regulation that doesn’t make sense. But since no one would have any problem coming up with a list of 13 rural states unalterably opposed to tampering with what they regard as holy writ, it’s impossible.

Dante’s Inferno

So, like characters in Dante’s Inferno, Americans are condemned to argue for all eternity about a problem that no one can fix. The same goes for the institutional structures of the Senate, the House, the Supreme Court, and the Electoral College.

Given Article V’s powerful bias in favor of the status quo and today’s political dysfunction: all are unfixable as well. Americans have done to themselves what the British have done with Brexit. They’ve locked in their own impotence not once, but many times over.

This is why the Yanks are even angrier nowadays than the Brits. Their leaders remind them nonstop that they are the most powerful people who have ever lived, that their country is the greatest on earth, that they are the envy of the world, blah blah blah. Yet democracy is squelched, government is at a standstill, the economy is turning sour, and conditions for a growing portion of the population are plunging downhill.

Yet there seems to be nothing the people can do about the problems because the Founders failed to provide adequate tools. So they sit and steam and then vote for a latter-day Napoleon III who bills himself as an anti-politician who will knock sense into the system from outside.

Though many political experts tell us that Donald Trump can’t win no matter how angry the American electorate seems to be, the experts also dismissed the chances of Brexit prevailing in the U.K.

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Needed: An EU Push on Palestine Peace

As the European Union displays more disunion with Brexit and threats of other exits, a renewed E.U. push for an Israel-Palestine peace accord could give Europe a needed sense of mission, suggests ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A common theme in commentary about implications of the Brexit vote last week is that both the European Union and Britain will be so preoccupied with sorting out whatever will be Britain's new relationship with Europe that they will have a deficit of energy and attention to devote to other matters.

Paul Scham of the Middle East Institute applies this thought to diplomacy aimed at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, writing that "it seems unlikely that the EU will be willing or able to focus on Israeli-Palestinian issues for the foreseeable future." He expects that members of the Israeli government are feeling relieved about that. He no doubt is right on that last point; the Israeli government does not want any diplomacy aimed at ending the occupation of Palestinian territory, and it has been fighting hard to defeat the recent initiative by the French on the subject.

But although the general idea of limited time and attention is valid, there is more that the Europeans can, and should, do in making progress on other diplomatic matters, and on the Israeli-Palestinian matter in particular. Look beyond the discombobulation resulting from the British vote and one can see that the initial reactions to the shock of last Thursday probably have underestimated the ability of the Europeans to walk and chew gum at the same time.

Moreover, it will sink in over the coming weeks that Britain might never actually leave the E.U. Boris Johnson (the Conservative Party figure who was a lead supporter of the "Leave" campaign) has good reasons to be waffling the way he has since the vote.

European statesmen also will be able to understand that it is in the best interests of the European project for them not just to sit and stew about the little Englanders. Now more than ever, with doubts being voiced about the future of that project, there is a need for activity that will restore a sense of commonality and momentum to Europe.

The E.U. needs good projects that will show that Europe as a collective enterprise is robust enough that something like the Brexit business will not screw up everything else. Vigorous diplomacy aimed at resolving the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict is one such project.

As a candidate for E.U. efforts it has several attractions. The need for progress on the subject is as evident as it has always been – on multiple grounds, including justice, human rights, stability, and the curbing of extremism. The United States is, despite some encouraging evolution of attitudes in recent years, still hamstrung by its internal politics and for that reason unlikely to function effectively as a fair-minded outsider.

Looking ahead past the U.S. presidential election does not give basis for hope that the United States will play such a role any better than it is now. With the United States self-crippled on the issue, the European Union is the next best actor to step into the role.

The E.U. already has been involved in diplomacy about the Israeli-Palestinian issue, including as a member of the so-called quartet along with the United Nations, United States, and Russia. And now with the initiative of France, one of the most important E.U. members, there is a ready-made current diplomatic vehicle for the E.U. as a whole to help drive.

So get out of the funk about Brexit and get going on this, Europe; you have an opportunity to do yourself good when you especially need it while also doing good about a problem on another continent that has caused grief for decades.

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The 'Dissent' Memo That Isn't

The major U.S. media touts a State Department "dissent cable" urging military strikes on the Syrian military as a brave act by 51 diplomats, but it actually matches the views of Secretary Kerry and other top officials, notes Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

The [memorandum by 51 State Department officials](#) calling for U.S. military intervention in Syria has been treated in news media coverage as a case of "dissent" from existing Syria policy by individual officials involved in Syria policy.

But the memo has all the earmarks of an initiative that had the blessing of the most senior officials in the department – including Secretary of State John Kerry himself – rather than having been put together by individual officials entirely on their own. And it may mark the beginning of an effort to take advantage of the presidential candidacy of Hillary Clinton.

The memo called for a “more militarily assertive US role” in the Syrian conflict in the form of “a judicious use of stand-off and air weapons, which would undergird and drive a more focused and hard-nosed US-led diplomatic process.” That is precisely the policy option that Secretary of State Kerry has been widely reported to have championed privately for years. As the story in the New York Times, which published the supposedly confidential memo, noted, “[H]igher-level State Department officials are known to share their concerns.”

The submission of the memo through the State Department’s “dissent channel” appears to have been a device to make it appear entirely independent of senior officials in the department. According to the State Department regulation on the “dissent channel,” it is to be used only when dissenting views “cannot be communicated in a full and timely manner through regular operating channels or procedures” or “in a manner which protects the author from any penalty, reprisal, or recrimination.”

But there is no reason to believe that the officials in question had any problem in expressing their views on Obama’s Syria policy over the years. The names of the signatories were not included in the document published by the New York Times, but all 51 officials claimed to have been directly involved in the making or implementation of Syria policy, according to the report. That would certainly encompass the vast majority of those who have worked on Syria over the past five years. It is inconceivable that those officials have not participated in innumerable policy discussions on Syria in which their personal views were freely expressed.

The Kerry Line

The supposed dissenters knew very well, moreover, that Kerry has been advocating essentially the same policy they were articulating for years. Kerry began making the case for sending large-scale, heavy weapons to armed opposition groups and carrying out cruise missile strikes against the Assad regime’s air force in 2013. He continued to advocate that military option in meetings with the President, only to be rebuffed, according to the account by The Atlantic’s Jeffrey Goldberg published in April.

Obama became so irritated by Kerry’s recommendations for cruise missile strikes in Syria that he decreed that only the Secretary of Defense would be permitted

to recommend the use of force.

Since mid-2013, Kerry has been the leading figure in a political-bureaucratic coalition favoring a more aggressive military and covert action role in Syria. The coalition also includes the CIA's National Clandestine Services and civilian leaders in the Pentagon who are loath to see the United States cooperating with Russia and relying on its military power in Syria.

The arguments made by the purported dissenters are in line with some of Kerry's public talking points. Although he has not call for U.S. attacks on Assad's forces explicitly, Kerry has strongly hinted that there is little or no hope for progress in the political talks on Syria without some U.S. leverage on Assad. The memo sounds the same theme: "While the regime maintains the advantage," the authors aver, "an undeterred [Assad] will resist compromises sought by almost all opposition factions and regional actors."

Kerry frequently reiterates in public statements that the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or Daesh) cannot be defeated as long as Assad remains in power. The memo echoes his argument, asserting: "The prospects for rolling back Daesh's hold on territory are bleak without the Sunni Arabs, who the regime continues to bomb and starve."

The Nusra Question

The memo presents missile strikes as a way of responding to Assad's "egregious violations of the ceasefire." The idea that Assad is responsible for the breakdown of the ceasefire, which ignores the well-documented fact that many of the groups that Kerry calls the "legitimate opposition" openly sided with al-Nusra Front (Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate) in deliberately and massively breaking the ceasefire, is also part of the Kerry State Department public posture.

The memo never even mentions the problem of al-Nusra Front and the risk that the use of U.S. force to change the military balance between the opposition and the regime would risk an ultimate victory by the jihadists.

One point in the memo sounds very much like an argument intended to be leaked to the media in order to dramatize the case for war against the Assad regime. "None of us see or has seen merit in a large-scale US invasion of Syria or the sudden collapse of existing Syrian institutions," it says.

Since no one in the administration is advocating a "large-scale US invasion" or the "sudden collapse" of the Syrian state, that sentence was clearly calculated to influence public opinion rather than to convince anyone in the State Department of the need for the use of force.

Kerry made no effort to hide his pleasure with the “Dissent Memo,” telling a reporter on June 20 that the memo was “good” and that he intended to meet with its authors. His spokesman John Kirby said he would not characterize Kerry’s comments as “indicative of a full-throated endorsement of his views” in the memo – an obvious hint that it was consistent with Kerry’s views.

Kirby went on to say that State Department is “discussing other alternatives, other options, mindful ... that the current approach is, without question, struggling.” After Kerry’s meeting with 10 members of the group on June 21, Kirby refused to say whether Kerry agreed with the signatories, citing the need “to respect the confidentiality” of the “dissent channel” process.

Clinton Group Backs Memo

The leak of the memo coincided with the advocacy of the same military option by a Washington think tank with ties to Hillary Clinton. On June 16, the very day the New York Times published the story of the leaked memo by State Department officials, the Center for New American Security (CNAS) released a report on a study group on defeating the Islamic State that called for a U.S. policy to “threaten and execute limited strikes against the Assad regime,” to signal to Assad as well Russia and Iran that it is “willing to get more engaged.” The same report called for dispatching “several thousand” U.S. troops to Syria.

The study group was co-chaired by CNAS co-founder Michele Flournoy, formerly third-ranked Defense Department official, although the report was written by lower-level CNAS staff members. Since leaving the Obama administration in 2009, Flournoy has been critical of its defense policy and is now regarded as the most likely choice for Defense Secretary in a Hillary Clinton administration.

Clinton is clearly sympathetic to the military option in the leaked memo. The timing of the appearance of both documents immediately after Clinton had clinched the nomination suggests that the bureaucratic figures behind the push for a new war in Syria are seeking to take advantage of the Clinton presidential run to build public support for that option.

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Mexican Resistance to Neoliberal Social Cuts

Resistance to Mexican President Peña Nieto's neoliberal "reforms" to health, education and energy policies has spread across much of the country after violent clashes left some eight people dead in Oaxaca, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Eight people were killed in Nochixtlán, a town near Oaxaca City in Mexico, after turning out to support a blockade by teachers protesting neoliberal cuts to education and other social programs, reported independent journalist Andalusia Knoll Soloff from the scene of the clashes with police.

"The residents came out when they heard about the repression on Sunday [June 19]," Soloff told me over a noisy phone line. "They had come out to support the teachers, and many, mostly young men, came out to help the people who were injured. One family had a 19-year-old son who went in the ambulance to help the wounded and when they arrived at the blockade, he was killed by the police."

Dennis Bernstein: When he arrived at the blockade, he was killed by the police. Set the scene. This was an action by the teachers, and the community came out to support the action. The government says there was some unnamed gunmen or gunfire coming from somewhere, so the Mexican security forces had no choice but to open fire. What have you learned?

Andalusia Knoll Soloff: This needs to be seen in the context of Mexico's teachers movement, which has been mobilizing for the past three years across Mexico against what they see as neoliberal economic reforms which are attacks on labor rights and put schools and teachers in marginalized communities at a disadvantage. They have been protesting against these educational reforms since they were introduced three years ago when the new president, Enrique Peña Nieto, entered into power.

Recently, the reform went into effect, so teachers have been mobilizing more, mostly in the states of Chiapas, Michoacán, Guerrero and Oaxaca. In Oaxaca, the teachers union has a history of radical uprisings and movements. Ten years ago, it was here that the movement of the APPO (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca) began as a teacher's encampment in the city of Oaxaca, and then became a larger popular movement that called for the governor, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, to resign, as well as many other demands. Last week was the 10-year anniversary of

this popular movement of 2006.

Two of the leaders of the CNTE Section 22, the teachers union in Oaxaca, were arrested. In response to these arrests and educational reform in general, the teachers blockaded one of the major highways that connects Mexico City to Oaxaca City. This blockage was in a town called Nochixtlán and it was held by the teachers for about a week.

Then the police came on Sunday because they wanted to open up the highway. Hundreds and hundreds of federal and riot police arrived. There's conflicting testimony about when they actually opened fire, but it was early in the day. That's when many residents and parents of students of Nochixtlán came out to support the blockage to protest the police action. The government and police have been saying this unknown group of people came and opened fire.

There is absolutely no proof of that. There is tons of photographic and video proof that the police were firing on the protesters from early on during the day. There is not one single photographic or any other proof that an exterior group arrived and opened fire. I think the government is trying to save face and say whatever they can to make it seem like the police didn't come and massacre people in a town where people were armed only with rocks, maybe some firecrackers, and maybe some Molotov cocktails. There is no documentation that they were armed beyond that. The police were armed with assault weapons, pistols and a wide range of firearms.

DB: You are saying that those who were wounded and killed were local residents. Were any of the teachers killed?

AL: No. They were all local residents who came out in support of the teachers and the blockage.

DB: Why would the residents be such strong supporters that they would come out on behalf of the teachers?

AL: Many of the residents told me this is a culmination. This isn't just about educational reform. In 2006, the teachers were protesting to end the reforms in order to protect their jobs and their field of work. Then it became a popular movement where people realized schools didn't have the services they need. The students don't get a good education. There aren't enough jobs. There is intense poverty in many places in Oaxaca.

What I understood from the people I interviewed is that it became a general discontent with the government and the reforms, and discontent with what is happening in general in Mexico with violation of human rights, lack of education and access to jobs, even basic services. Today people were saying that in their

neighborhoods there was no water. In Oaxaca City today there were protests of medical workers, doctors and nurses who were saying that certain reforms have cut their salaries and their ability to provide care.

There is general discontent. That was part of the reason why the residents came out to support the teachers. About 90 percent of the residents have children who are students in the schools at which the teachers work. Many have come out because they heard there were injured people, not necessarily in solidarity with the teachers, but to help people in need.

DB: Did you interview any of the injured, or family members of those who were hurt or killed?

AL: Yes. I interviewed family members of two who were killed. I interviewed Patricia Sanchez, the mother of Jesús Cadena, who was 19 years old, just about to enter the university to become an engineer. He had not been part of the blockade at all, but that day he said, "Mom, they really need our help." He went to the church that was calling for people to come and help. At the church, he got into an ambulance to help the injured.

They said he was killed when the ambulance got to the blockade and the police were firing on people. His mother went to the blockade to look for him, and that's when she was told he was killed. Police were firing from all directions. I arrived a day after the large number of people were killed. Everywhere I went, different teachers and residents showed us bullet casings, tear gas canisters and where they were firing.

We went to a cemetery, and the caretaker there told us that the federal police held a gun to his head, took his cell phone away, and told him they'd kill him if he did anything. Then they started opening fire on the protesters within the cemetery. He showed us where there was a round of bullet casings on the ground there.

DB: What else did the mom say? She must have been in mourning.

AL: She's of course destroyed. She was crying a lot, not believing her son was taken from her. She said that he was always wanting to help people so much that he had said when he died, he wanted his organs donated because he was so healthy. She said, "Why did my son have to die like this? Now I can't even donate his organs to anyone. What will happen now?"

She said the president sent out a tweet saying my regrets are with the families, etc. She said, "Then what are your regrets? Maybe you should have come here in the first place to talk to the teachers instead of sending in thousands of police to come and kill us. What are you going to do? You can't send my son

back. I can't get my son back. What happens next? How will there be justice? I don't care if they fire the person who ordered the attack. There will be no justice."

In the last three years, there has been a lot of impunity in Mexico. There is the case of the 43 students who disappeared, and in Tlatlaya, military soldiers opened fire on a group of men and then claimed the men opened on the soldiers. In both of these cases there is almost total impunity.

Because of this impunity, families of those who have been victims of state violence believe nothing will happen. They have all the reason in the world to think that, because Mexico doesn't have a good track record. It has all the great laws in the world on the books but in actual implementation there is nothing to show that Mexico actually tries to bring those responsible for these human rights violations, massacres, assassinations, etc. to justice.

DB: Can you give us the mom's name and son again?

AL: Jesús Cadena was murdered and Patricia Sanchez is his mother.

DB: Tell us about the other family of the person who was murdered.

AL: Many people fear the repression here and fear speaking out about the repression. Most people didn't want to be filmed on camera, or only filmed from behind, or don't want to give their names. The father of this casualty, Oscar Luna, didn't want his name or any family photos shown. The son was 23 years old. The family hadn't really been participating in the teachers' movement. His son had said, "I am fed up with what's happening in Mexico and my town, and I want to go out and help the teachers." His son had just left the house and, upon arriving closer to the barricades of the blockade, he was killed.

DB: He was killed. What is your best understanding of the situation now? We know that the teachers and medical workers are mobilizing. What is the growing response to this?

AL: People have been protesting all over the country, and the world. Mexicans living around the world have been organizing protests. There was arbitrary detention the other day in Mexico City of at least six people, perhaps nine or more, [Later reports say there were over 30 people detained] who went to protest at the government offices of Oaxaca in Mexico City. They were arbitrarily detained, including an independent journalist from a media collective called Subversiones. These are people showing their discontent with the repression in Oaxaca. Fortunately, they have been released.

Eight people were murdered, and there is evidence that it was the federal police

who killed them. Now I am at a school where different teachers are gathering and government human rights workers are here to document what happened and determine whether it was a mysterious armed group or the police responsible for the repression and killings. There have been blockades all across Oaxaca, in Oaxaca City and surrounding towns. ... I believe one young man was killed there. It's escalating. It's not just about educational reform. In many ways it's a repeat of 2006 where it started as a teacher's movement and expanded into a popular movement.

DB: People might not have the exact terminology, but they are very aware, in real terms, of what neoliberalism and free trade are, and what the impact will be if these institutions, like the teachers union and schools that train teachers, are undermined by government policies. This is the front line of the battle.

AL: Correct. There has also been an economic crisis, which people in Mexico know is related to oil prices. Before NAFTA, the value of the peso was 10 to a dollar, and now it's almost 20 to the dollar, which has affected people's purchasing power. Minimum wage has not gone up in 30 years, so people's purchasing power is almost 70 percent less than it was. Oaxaca is a rural state, largely indigenous, with a lot of rural poverty. There aren't even paved roads, and often communities have no electricity, so no computers. So teachers in these rural isolated communities play a very, very important role in the communities. People know that teachers were already paid horrible wages, and now lost their job security.

The reform requires that parents need to pay for more school supplies, taking on more of the economic burden. They might not know this is neoliberalism, but they know that this is financially affecting them and that they are against it. There is a very strong current in all of Mexico to defend them. The CNTE Section 22 has for decades been a strong leftist institution. Many people have grown up with their families, aunts, uncles, being teachers, so are part of this teacher's movement.

DB: You are at a school where people are coming together and organizing. There is a call for a protest by medical workers.

AL: Blockades are being planned. A large protest is planned in Oaxaca City, including labor organizations. Also, in the Zocalo in the city there is an encampment of teachers and others. Here, people are sending support of supplies, food and water from all over the country.

[Andalusia Knoll Soloff can be followed on twitter and tumbler as Andalalucha. She is a frequent contributor to Vice News, TRT World and Democracy Now!]

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