

Colombian union leader assassinated as national strike intensifies

Cory Johnson
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Union leaders representing 650,000 striking public sector employees walked out of talks with Colombian government officials October 20 after a lone gunman suspected of right-wing paramilitary ties assassinated a leader of one of the labor federations involved in the two-week old wildcat strike.

Jorge Ortega, vice president of the Stalinist-led Unified Workers' Central (CUT), was shot six times in the face, chest and stomach on the steps outside his apartment in a working class neighborhood of the capital city, Bogota.

The murder came after several days of intensified picket line confrontations in which government forces have unleashed teargas and water cannon against strikers, and as a poll revealed Colombian President Andres Pastrana's approval rating plunged 33 percent. Pastrana placed responsibility for the death on a 'dark force trying to sow chaos' and offered a \$63,000 reward for the murderer. Port workers and other private sector workers of CUT voted to stage 24-hour work stoppages in protest of the killing.

Ortega reported having been followed for days by suspected right-wing elements. Two weeks ago his apartment was ransacked without anything being stolen. He was in the process of requesting government protection when he was gunned down. The government insisted that Ortega accept secret police bodyguards while the union leader was demanding that the government hire and train bodyguards from a list of individuals provided by the union.

It is a well-known fact that there is collusion between the paramilitary squads and the government security forces. Wilson Borja, head of the main public sector workers' union FENALTRASE, declared of Ortega's murder, 'This was the paramilitaries or maybe somebody from the government.' In the last decade

alone 35,000 people have been killed by Colombian death squads. Ortega's union, CUT, during the same period has had 2,500 of its members killed.

A recent Human Rights Watch report details the complicity of the government, as well as the US military, with the death squads. It catalogs one massacre in the rural town of Mapiripan in July 1997, when paramilitary squads landed an airport shared by the US military, and then passed unimpeded through several government checkpoints to torture and kill 14 peasants accused of organizing protests against the aerial spraying of drug crops. Two men were decapitated, their heads kicked like soccer balls down the street, while another was hanged and quartered. US troops are allegedly fighting narcotics trafficking but have worked with the government to suppress a guerilla insurgency.

On the same day as Ortega's assassination violence broke out in other sectors of the country. A right-wing death squad murdered a mayor near the northwestern town of Anori, the eleventh mayor to be gunned down this year. In the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta mountain range of northern Colombia gunmen kidnapped 19 investigators from the Chief Prosecutor's Department. The officials had been dispatched to investigate the massacre of at least 17 peasants by paramilitary forces.

The strike by public sector workers was launched to protest Pastrana's austerity program which aims to further impoverish the Colombian workers and peasantry while appeasing international financial interests. The same day that violence erupted across the country, the Colombian Congress approved a national budget of which 32.6 percent goes towards servicing the country's debt. The US government, which backs Pastrana's measures, has renewed military aid to the

country after severely cutting it back in 1994, following the exposure of numerous human rights violations by the Colombian government.

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