

Mass strikes in Colombia hit austerity demands

Cory Johnson
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Some 200,000 demonstrators marched on the streets of Colombia's capital city of Bogota October 14 protesting the austerity program of President Andres Pastrana, while hundreds of riot police armed with tear gas guns, mounted police and soldiers in tanks lined the path of the demonstration.

It was the eighth day of a strike by 650,000 public sector workers involving doctors, teachers, hospital workers, oil workers, airport, tax and customs workers. On October 9 Pastrana condemned the strike as 'unacceptable and unjustified' and declared it illegal. 'This strike has gone beyond being a labor conflict and has become a political action. It's not possible to sit down with a minority and talk about the future of the whole state,' he stated. 'I have no intention of cutting any deal that puts the stability of the whole nation at risk.'

The unions are protesting Pastrana's implementation of an austerity package that will tax a wide variety of consumer services and commodities, cut public spending and implement plans to privatize state industries. In opposition to Pastrana's wage cap of 14 percent, the unions are demanding a wage increase for 1999 in line with Colombia's 18 percent inflation rate. Pastrana claims union demands would double the country's public deficit.

Pastrana's announcement led to a rupture of talks between the public sector unions and the government. 'The president has insulted the Colombian working classes. His remarks were completely unacceptable,' said Julio Roberto Gomez, head of the General Federation of Colombian Workers (CGTD), the country's second-largest labor federation. 'We have broken off talks. There's nothing else to do and the strike will continue.'

Directly following Pastrana's edict, fights between oil

workers and soldiers broke out as the army occupied the oil refinery in Cartagena in an effort to head off threats by the oil workers union to stop production. In Bogota, employees of the state-run rural savings bank, Caja Agraria, employed high pressure water hoses against attacks by police firing tear gas. On October 14 riot police used nightsticks against a demonstration of 2,000 telecommunications workers outside the offices of Telecom, the state-run utility, while scabs were escorted through picket lines in armored cars. One worker was arrested and fifteen injured.

At other locations water cannon and tear gas were turned against demonstrators. Bogota Police Chief General Argemiro Serna stated he had received orders to clear protesters from at least 39 public offices around the capital 'with force if necessary.'

'We understand the country's situation. But we shouldn't be made to pay for the mistakes and plundering of previous governments,' said Cristina Mallorga, a striking nurse. School teachers are indignant over Pastrana's dumping of his campaign pledge to make education universally available to all, as well as the implementation of a plan to make all but the poorest sections of the Colombian working class pay for schooling.



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