

As workers launch general strike

Colombia's President Uribe intensifies repression

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Colombia's armed forces were placed on a "maximum state of alert" September 16 as hundreds of thousands of workers joined in a general strike against the policies of the newly installed US-backed government of President Alvaro Uribe.

Only minor confrontations broke out between demonstrating workers and anti-riot police in the capital of Bogota and a few other cities, but in the countryside there were widespread reports of repression by the army and right-wing paramilitary squads aimed at preventing peasants from joining in the nationwide protest.

The workers' strike, called by Colombia's two main union federations, was directed against cuts in salaries and benefits, a lengthening of the workday and a "reform" of the country's pension system, all demanded by the International Monetary Fund as part of a new austerity plan.

Workers in the oil, telecommunications and airline industry joined the walkout, as did public employees, who shut down government offices, schools and non-emergency operations at hospitals. A walkout by firefighters at the country's airports paralyzed much of air transport. The government has responded with threats of retaliation against government workers.

The peasants' mobilization, which has continued after September 16, has challenged both the government's economic policies and mounting repression in rural Colombia. Organizations representing Colombian peasants—80 percent of whom live in poverty—are demanding a comprehensive agrarian reform and a crackdown on the paramilitary squads that terrorize the rural poor. At present, 53 percent of the country's land is in the hands of just 1.8 percent of its landholders.

In many areas, peasant leaders and others who joined the protest were arrested. Army troops blocked marches in several towns, while right-wing paramilitary groups also set up roadblocks, warning demonstrators that their villages would suffer massacres if they did not turn around and go home.

The outbreak of mass protests barely one month after Uribe's inauguration has underscored the broad popular opposition to the new right-wing regime. It has also made clear that his government's plans—supported by Washington—to double the size of the army and create new means of repression will

inevitably be aimed not only at defeating armed guerrillas, but also at suppressing this social unrest.

This unrest can only grow given an economic crisis that will deepen as the government escalates the country's civil war. The Uribe government recently revealed that it is running a \$3 billion deficit in the 2003 budget, and that the amount needed to service the country's foreign debt equals nearly 80 percent of the government's projected tax revenues.

The crackdown on the peasant marchers exemplified the repressive character of the Uribe regime. Last week, the government unveiled a new series of "national security" measures that give the military and police virtually unrestrained powers. Warrantless searches, raids and arrests are once again permitted in Colombia, paving the way for a new wave of disappearances.

The September 10 presidential decree also creates new "consolidation and rehabilitation zones," similar to the infamous "strategic hamlets" established by US forces during the Vietnam War. The new zones will be under the ultimate authority of military commanders. Local residents will be forced to register with the military and will face severe restrictions on their freedom of travel.

These new measures have been imposed under a "state of public unrest" declared by Uribe within days of taking office, giving himself the right to implement security measures by decree. His Justice and Interior Minister Fernando Londoño announced recently that the government plans to resurrect the executive's right to impose a "state of siege," a repressive power that was removed from Colombia's 1991 constitution because of past abuses. It would give the president extraordinary powers to suspend civil liberties indefinitely.

The government has also launched a drive to recruit thousands of civilian informers in the cities and 15,000 peasants to collect intelligence in the countryside and, if called upon by the military, battle the guerrillas. The proposed civilian informer units are modeled on a similar program that Uribe introduced when he was governor of Antioquia province. There, many of these groups constituted themselves as armed vigilantes, assisting right-wing paramilitary groups in the

assassination of government opponents.

The Bush administration has continued pouring military aid into Colombia. On September 9, the US State Department officially certified an “improvement” in the country’s human rights record, allowing the release of another \$42 million in weapons, munitions and training. Congressional legislation providing the aid includes a provision requiring a prior human rights certification.

Human rights organizations denounced the State Department’s findings as a deliberate deception. “To say that Colombia has complied with human rights conditions is nothing short of a farce,” said William Shultz, executive director of Amnesty International USA.

The legislation specifically requires that the Colombian military remove suspected members of the armed forces who engage in human rights violations or collaborate with right-wing paramilitaries, organized in the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia.

Amnesty was joined by Human Rights Watch and the Washington Office on Latin America in issuing a briefing paper that names senior Colombian officers who, rather than being expelled for war crimes, have been promoted. Chief among them is Gen. Carlos Ospina Ovalle, tapped by the new president to head Colombia’s army despite extensive evidence linking him to massacres, executions and torture carried out by his troops when he commanded the Fourth Brigade in 1997 and 1998.

It cited the case of another senior naval officer charged with planning and ordering the assassinations of 57 trade unionists, human rights workers and community leaders. While the State Department had cited the officer’s removal from his post as evidence of the Colombian government’s commitment to human rights, charges have since been dropped and he has been appointed military attaché at the Colombian embassy in Israel, one of the country’s largest arms suppliers.

The report also charged Colombia’s new attorney general, Luis Camilo Osorio, with systematically purging prosecutors and investigators who had pursued human rights charges against military officers.

State Department claims that progress has been made in severing the intimate ties between the Colombian military and the right-wing paramilitary organizations were likewise refuted by the report. “Throughout Colombia, paramilitaries are able to move troops and supplies unhindered past military bases, roadblocks, troops, and check points,” it said.

Nowhere is this more true than in the province of Arauca, bordering Venezuela. The region is the focus of a key US-initiated military operation aimed at guarding a pipeline used to pump out oil from fields operated by US-based Occidental Petroleum. The US provided \$98 million last year for the arming and training of a special battalion, which essentially acts as a security guard for Occidental’s corporate interests. The pipeline has been a target of guerrilla attacks.

The funding, approved in the wake of September 11, marked a definitive escalation in the US intervention in Colombia, breaking with the previous pretext that the US was fighting a “drug war” aimed at halting cocaine trafficking and coca production. The program was pitched by the Bush administration as part of its global “war on terrorism.”

Its effect has already been a brutal escalation of terror against the people living in the area surrounding the pipeline. The Colombian military has essentially established a division of labor in Arauca, deploying its own troops to guard the pipeline against attacks, while unleashing the right-wing paramilitary squads to wage a “dirty war” against alleged guerrilla sympathizers in the area’s villages and countryside.

US military trainers are scheduled to arrive in the province next month to train a brigade of 7,000 troops. Washington is also to provide the force with helicopters.

With the growing threat of a US war in the Persian Gulf, Washington’s interest in developing an alternative source of oil in Colombia is a central motive for military intervention. Colombia currently produces 600,000 barrels of crude daily and petroleum constitutes the country’s principal export product.

Just last month, Canada’s Petrobank and the US firm Argosy Energy International signed contracts with Ecopetrol, Colombia’s state-owned oil firm, for rights to explore 200 square miles of the Putumayo basin with its potential reserves of 2.5 billion barrels. The area, bordering Ecuador and Peru, was the main target of the US Plan Colombia, the multibillion-dollar military buildup launched in the name of the “war on drugs.” It remains a key zone of conflict between the guerrillas of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), on the one side, and the army and paramilitary squads on the other.



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