

Background to the Honduran coup: Poverty, exploitation and imperialist domination

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On June 28, a US-trained army with close links to the US Southern Command removed President Manuel Zelaya from office, kidnapped him and expelled him from Honduras. Given the close relationship between the Honduran army and the Pentagon, it is not credible that the coup took place without Washington's knowledge and tacit approval.

Behind the coup, which installed a new president, Roberto Micheletti, is one of the most exploitative and oppressive political and economic systems in the world upon which the wealthy landowning and business elites, the military and the church depend for their wealth. These forces are now threatened by the escalation of the class struggle.

Social tensions that are being fueled by the global economic crisis find their expression in deep divisions within the country's ruling elite. Zelaya's pragmatic turn to the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chavez for cheap oil and loans combined with his populist rhetoric and his government's raising the minimum wage by 60 percent have all been aimed at containing the explosive social struggles in Honduras.

Zelaya is a wealthy landowner and timber magnate who won the presidential contest in 2005 on a right-wing law-and-order platform as the candidate the Liberal Party, one of the two traditional parties of the Honduran oligarchy that have alternated in power for over a century. Nonetheless, his actions have brought upon him the hostility of his own class and his former closest political allies, including Micheletti, a fellow Liberal whom he had endorsed as the candidate to succeed him.

Both factions defend the system that is responsible for the massive inequality and poverty that prevail in Honduras.

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the American hemisphere. By most indexes that measure living standards, it lags behind its Central American neighbors, Guatemala and Nicaragua, nations that are also extremely poor. In the Americas, only Haiti is poorer than Honduras.

Honduras is also in transition from a rural, largely agricultural economy dominated by a feudal social structure—giant estates rule over peasant-owned mini-farms—to an urban economy with a significant industrial sector. It has a young and growing urban working class.

The old plantation economy, based largely on the production of bananas for export to the United States, is being transformed. Larger capital investments have resulted in redundancies among agricultural workers, increasing poverty and pushing agricultural workers into the cities, despite chronic high levels of urban unemployment. This urban reserve army of labor now depends on the export-oriented manufacturing industries, commonly known as "maquiladoras." Sweatshop working conditions at these plants are considered to be among the worst in the world.

The average working day for adult men and women is now 14 hours under a system known as four-by-four or three-by-four. Workers labor 14 hours a day, three or four days a week, and are replaced by another crew during their days off, so that the machinery can be kept running constantly. The production quotas are so high that even ill workers are given limited rest time and meal breaks—one half-hour break per shift. As orders rise and fall, so does employment at the plants. Labor laws are routinely ignored, and union organizing is repressed.

On March 24, the Inter-American Committee on Human Rights (CIDH), an agency of the Organization of American States (OAS), held hearings in Washington on conditions at the 229 maquiladoras in Honduras. These enterprises collectively employ 130,000 workers, 69 percent of whom are young women. CIDH officials called on the Honduran government to investigate what it called "typical examples of the exploitation of poor people."

According to Florencia Quesada of the Honduran Women's Collective, "Women workers are hired when they are 18 and fired when they are 30, because the owners prefer younger women. In many cases, the hiring process requires that the women undress. Women showing cesarean scars or those over a certain weight limit are rejected."

Quesada described the crowded working conditions and the long hours in the maquiladoras. She reported that at times, employees have been required to work non-stop for 24 hours. The object, said Quesada, "is to meet exorbitant targets" under the threat of a 40 percent cut in wages.

Another member of the Honduran Women's Collective, Brenda Mejía, spoke about the muscular and joint lesions that result from the intense work pace. In many cases, "workers are incapable of coordinating simple movements, such as drinking a glass of water." Those who are incapacitated by the work have little chance of collecting disability payments or social security benefits. If they manage to collect such benefits, the sums are very low.

Over 300,000 children labor in Honduras. Their working day is only marginally shorter than that of adults. In the maquiladoras, children as young as 15 are forced to work 10 to 13 hours a day for as little as 40 cents an hour, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that children work in the following industries: prostitution (particularly in the tourist sector along the North Coast), fireworks manufacturing (in Copan), marine diving (on lobster boats on the Mosquito Coast), limestone quarries and garbage dumps (in the two large cities of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula), agriculture (in the coffee and melon industries).

Poverty in Honduras is concentrated in the countryside, where 53 percent of the population currently lives. Some 75 percent of that population exists under conditions that make it impossible for them to meet basic needs, resulting in very high rates of infant mortality, child malnutrition, child labor and illiteracy. Seventy percent of the population live under the poverty line, and 40 percent subsist on less than two dollars a day. UN statistics show that the probability of an average Honduran

dying before the age of 40 is 12 percent. Sixteen percent of Hondurans are considered severely deprived of health services, and 17 percent of children under the age of 5 are underweight.

One in five adults is unable to read or write. At nearly 30 percent, the unemployment rate is one of the highest in Latin America.

As banana plantations have shed workers, more and more people have chosen to move to the cities, where they make up a large reserve army of labor, whose hourly wages fluctuate between US 75 cents and 95 cents for male workers and considerably less for female workers. For tens of thousands, migration to the cities is followed by emigration to Mexico and, ultimately, to the United States.

The distribution of income and wealth is immensely unequal, though not unusual by Central American standards. The top 10 percent of the population consumes over 45 percent of the output of goods and services. The lion's share goes to the very top layer, which is divided into three main groups—large landowners, industrialists, and the high echelons of the military.

The very bottom 10 percent consists of peasants and consumes less than 4 percent of output. There is also a small but growing urban middle class that was severely affected by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, and has yet to recover. The Hurricane devastated Honduras, killing 7,000 people and destroying 50 percent of the nation's transportation infrastructure and many of the plantations. The effects of the storm were magnified by the backward slash-and-burn agricultural techniques that created the conditions for widespread flooding.

The hurricane accelerated the movement of workers to the cities and fueled the growth of the maquiladoras, mainly in textile goods, dependent on the fluctuations of demand from the United States.

The current global financial crisis and the drop in demand for clothing in the US are having a devastating effect on the economy. Twenty-nine maquiladoras have shut their doors since the crisis began in 2008. So far 30,000 workers have been sacked with little or no severance pay. There is no unemployment compensation in Honduras, raising class tensions to the breaking point.

Historically, this pattern of intensive exploitation has been maintained through repression, often with the assistance of the United States. The traditional ruling classes are dependent on feudal patterns of land ownership and on their relationship to US imperialism. Throughout the last century, the Honduran state depended on the US Marines and Navy to stand between it and a rebellious agricultural proletariat and peasantry.

Honduras was repeatedly invaded by US forces—in 1907, 1911, 1912, 1919, 1924, 1925 and 1931. In each of these invasions, the object was to protect US corporate interests and the stability of tyrannical puppet regimes.

The price extracted from the Honduran ruling classes was control over the fertile eastern tropical valleys by the United Fruit Company, which, beginning in 1906, established banana plantations in Honduras and set itself up as a state within a state. In 1910, facing resistance from Honduran President Miguel Dávila, the company organized a coup to overthrow Dávila. From then on, Honduras became the classic "banana republic."

In 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt disavowed open and unilateral military interventions in Latin America. Instead, the US pursued its imperialist interests mostly through the creation of proxy armies and the integration and subordination of national armies and security forces to the US military command structure. Since then, Honduras has been a base of operations and supply chain for US intervention in the region. In 1954, a CIA-trained fascist army crossed into Guatemala from Honduras and El Salvador in the successful military coup against President Jacobo Arbenz. In 1961, Honduras was used as a training base and launching pad for the Bay of Pigs invasion against Cuba's Fidel Castro. In the 1980s, the CIA-backed contra armies that fought the Sandinista government in Nicaragua were directed and supplied from Honduras.

The country still hosts one of the largest overseas US military bases in the region, with 600 American troops stationed at the Soto Cano Air Base, 50 miles northwest of Tegucigalpa,

As is typical of economies based on plantations, extreme inequality in Honduras is joined by a history of labor militancy and resistance. In April 1954, as a CIA army was invading Guatemala, dock workers in the Honduran port of Tela refused to load a United Fruit ship. News of their job action spread quickly to other ports and gained the support of railroad and plantation workers. A strike that had begun as a demand for overtime pay became a massive struggle for the 8-hour day and decent living standards and working conditions. Strike committees took over entire towns.

The strike spread to Tegucigalpa and gained the support of factory workers there. Despite mass state repression, the strike lasted 69 days and was ended only with partial concessions to the workers, including the recognition of trade unions. It is this resistance and self-sacrificing spirit that the Honduran ruling class fears the most.

In response to the June 28 coup, it is the Honduran workers who have mounted the most determined resistance, carrying out strikes and protests, including the nationwide walkout by the country's 60,000 teachers, now in its second week.

Whatever their tactical differences, the faction led by Zelaya and that of Micheletti both fear this movement. No doubt, the concern that these struggles could spin out of control has weighed heavily on Zelaya's decision to subordinate himself to US-brokered "mediation" between himself and those who overthrew him.

The class relations and social conditions that exist in Honduras and throughout Central America make it impossible to secure democracy and freedom from imperialist domination without building an independent political movement of the working class to end class oppression and build a socialist society..



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