

One year since the Honduran coup

Bill Van Auken
28 June 2010

Today marks the first anniversary of the military coup that ousted the elected president of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, inaugurating a period of repressive violence against the country's working class that continues to this day.

The Obama administration's defense of the current regime of President Porfirio Lobo Sosa and its campaign for the normalization of its relations with the hemisphere and the world represents the culmination of Washington's tacit backing for the coup.

On June 28, 2009, heavily armed troops burst into the presidential palace in Tegucigalpa, marched Zelaya out at gunpoint and bundled him onto a plane bound for exile. The operation represented the first successful 21st century coup in Latin America, a region where US-backed military dictatorships ruled over country after country during large parts of the 20th century.

The ostensible aim of the coup was to abort a consultative plebiscite organized by Zelaya to gauge popular support for the convening of a constituent assembly to rewrite the country's constitution, a regressive charter that was dictated in 1982 by an outgoing military dictatorship and the US embassy.

In justifying the coup, its backers within the Honduran oligarchy accused Zelaya of launching an extra-constitutional power grab for a third presidential term. This accusation, dutifully repeated by the media in the US, was nonsensical on its face, given that no vote to convene a constituent assembly could be organized before the ballot to choose Zelaya's successor.

Both Honduras's ruling "10 families" and the Obama administration in Washington had other reasons to seek Zelaya's overthrow.

The native oligarchy had begun to view Zelaya, himself a wealthy landowner and timber baron, as a traitor because of minimal reforms, such as an increase in the minimum wage, which threatened a slight

infringement on fortunes built through its collaboration with the transnational corporations in the super-exploitation of low-wage Honduran labor.

For Washington, Zelaya's forging of friendly ties with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in return for cheap oil and credit was seen as a potential threat to US imperialism's domination of a region it has long regarded as its "backyard." This was viewed with particular alarm, given that the largest US military base in all of Latin America is located in Honduras. Having been forced out of its air base in Manta, Ecuador last year, the prospect of being denied use of the Palmerola facility in Honduras was for the Pentagon strategically unacceptable.

While Obama declared his formal support for Zelaya's return to office, his administration refused to take any action against the coup's leaders or to condemn their repression against those who opposed it. The truth is that the ruling class of Honduras, which is dependent upon the US for the overwhelming share of the country's investment and trade, would not have taken such a step without a green light from Washington. Nor would a military that is trained, advised and largely armed by the US have executed it without the Pentagon's approval.

One year later, the base at Palmerola is functioning normally—as it did from the day of the coup onward. Last month, Gen. Douglas Fraser, chief of the US Southern Command, made his first trip to Honduras since the coup, declaring that there are "many opportunities for cooperation" with the country's military. Military aid from Washington has resumed.

The financial oligarchy that organized the military overthrow remains firmly in charge of the government of President Lobo. He was named the victor in a travesty of an election held last November, under conditions of de facto martial law and with more than half the electorate boycotting the vote.

Those who organized the coup and the bloody repression that followed enjoy absolute impunity. The political leader of the coup regime, Roberto Micheletti, has been named “congressman for life” to ensure that he will never lack parliamentary immunity. The coup’s military leader, Gen. Romeo Vasquez, has been installed as the head of Hondutel, the Honduran telephone corporation.

The repression continues in an especially brutal form, one that has a long and dark history in Honduras—death squad murders. Nine journalists have been killed since Lobo took office, making Honduras the most dangerous country in the world to practice that profession.

Also targeted for political assassination are union leaders and others identified with opposition to the June 2009 coup. Human rights groups have confirmed 14 such killings since Lobo took office.

No one has been arrested for any of these murders, or for any of those committed in the wake of the coup. Other forms of repression, including arbitrary detentions, beatings, torture and the shutdown of opposition media continue unabated.

The Lobo government, having declared itself bankrupt in February, has embarked upon a series of draconian austerity measures, including regressive tax hikes and a 20 percent across-the-board cut in government spending. Untouched by these cuts are the country’s security forces, whose funding has been increased. These policies are aimed at making the impoverished Honduran masses pay for the crisis created by global capitalism and the costs of suppressing opposition to last year’s coup.

Conditions of life for Honduran working people, who were already among the poorest in the hemisphere, have only worsened. According to the Honduran National Institute of Statistics, fully 51 percent of the working-age population is unemployed, with young workers largely locked out of the labor market.

Nearly 60 percent of the population lives in poverty, with over 36 percent subsisting below the extreme poverty line. Unemployment is being used as a battering ram against the working class, with employers and the government pressing for wage cuts, speedup and the wholesale repeal of labor laws.

One year on, the overriding political lessons of the Honduran coup have clearly emerged.

The first is the debunking of claims that the election

of Barack Obama signaled a shift of US foreign policy to “mutual respect” and peaceful cooperation internationally, and in Latin America in particular. The Honduran events, followed by the drive to secure bases in Colombia, the military intervention in Haiti and the stepped-up US support for the drug war in Mexico, have demonstrated that the Obama administration is prepared to use counterrevolutionary violence and military force to reassert Washington’s domination of the Western Hemisphere.

In the face of American capitalism’s protracted economic decline, it is turning to these methods to counter the growing challenges posed by the resistance of the Latin American working class, as well as the growing penetration of the region by powerful rivals, including Europe and China.

The second lesson is the bankruptcy of bourgeois nationalism, exemplified by the actions of the ousted Honduran president. Zelaya worked continuously to subordinate resistance to the coup to his own vain attempts to curry favor with Washington and secure his return to office via a US-brokered settlement with those who overthrew him.

The Honduran events have confirmed once again that it is impossible to successfully oppose imperialist intervention, coups and dictatorship outside of the independent political mobilization of the working class. While Honduran workers from the outset heroically resisted the coup regime installed last year, their struggles were dissipated and diverted by a leadership tied to the bourgeois Liberal Party, the party of both Zelaya and Micheletti.

The burning necessity in the face of the present crisis gripping Honduras and all of Central America is the building of a new revolutionary political movement of the working class, independent of all bourgeois parties, and armed with a program for the socialist transformation of not only Honduras, but the entire region, as part of the struggle for a United Socialist States of the Americas.

Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact