

Honduran government unleashes violence against striking teachers

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The US-backed government of President Porfirio Lobo has used police and military violence in an attempt to quell a teachers' strike and protests that have continued to escalate over the last month.

Tens of thousands of teachers and their supporters have taken to the streets of Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and cities and towns throughout Honduras in opposition to a new law—called “Encouraging community participation for the improvement of quality in education”—that decentralizes the country's public education system with the aim of preparing its privatization. The Lobo government has also repealed the Teachers Statute, wiping out rights won over decades.

The teachers are also demanding back pay for thousands of their members who have gone without salaries for months and are protesting the looting of their pension funds by successive governments.

The state violence employed against these protests has already claimed the life of one prominent teacher activist, Ylse Ivania Velázquez Rodríguez, who was killed on March 18 when police fired a tear gas canister at point-blank range into her head. At least 20 teachers have been imprisoned on “sedition” charges.

On Tuesday morning, the imprisoned teachers were arraigned at the Supreme Court of Justice, which resembled a military camp. Large crowds of teachers together with friends and relatives of the prisoners demonstrated outside the courthouse, demanding their freedom.

Lobo escalated the confrontation on Sunday, declaring the strike illegal and vowing to suspend without pay for six months all teachers who failed to return to the classroom the following morning and to permanently fire those who did not come back to work by April 4. He also claimed the power to outlaw the teachers' unions for backing the strike.

Teachers representatives vowed to defy the order. “We are out in the streets and we will stay there,” said Jaime Rodríguez, president of the middle school teachers' union.

Even prior to this latest ultimatum, the government had drawn up a list of 1,200 teachers involved in the mass protests and announced that they would be fired. The first

six on the list were the presidents of the six separate teachers' unions.

Parents of school children have also demonstrated in support of the teachers and have been met with equally fierce repression. Attempts by university students to join the protests were met last week with an assault on the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, UNAH, in Tegucigalpa by COBRA riot police and army troops using tear gas and truncheons.

Meanwhile, proposals before the National Congress for drastic changes to retirement laws for the country's public employees have brought other sectors of the workforce into the street. Workers from the state-owned Honduran Telecommunications Company (Hondutel) marched on the Congress building in a mass protest on Tuesday. The day before, some 14,000 public health workers walked off the job for four hours.

State officials have sought to defuse the growing anger by claiming that the proposed changes—which would raise the voluntary retirement age for public employees from 58 to 65, and the compulsory age from 65 to 70—are only under “study” and have not been presented as legislation.

The union protests over attacks on wages, benefits and basic rights have also denounced the government of Lobo as “illegitimate” and demanded the return of former President Manuel Zelaya, who was removed from office and expelled from the country in a US-backed right-wing military coup on June 28, 2009.

The National Front of Popular Resistance, an umbrella group formed by Zelaya supporters after the coup, has called for a general strike on Wednesday in support of the teachers unions.

“Porfirio Lobo is once again revealing the fascist character of his government, which is trying to destroy popular organizations and the gains of the people to impose an economic system that only benefits the oligarchy and multinational companies,” the front said in a statement.

Lobo, who came into office proclaiming a new politics of “Christian humanism” and “national reconciliation” has

proven to be every bit as reactionary and repressive as the coup regime headed by Roberto Michiletti, which oversaw his victory in an election boycotted by more than half of the population.

The Lobo government, soon after taking office, declared itself bankrupt and threw itself on the mercy of the International Monetary Fund, which imposed a structural adjustment program requiring severe austerity measures in return for \$202 million in credit. The attacks on public education and state pensions constitute the spearhead of this program.

At a news conference, the right-wing Honduran president charged that the teachers were “trying to destabilize my government” and that their protests were merely part of “an ideological strategy to provoke difficulties,” in particular with the Organization of American States, which in June is expected to reconsider its suspension of Honduras after the 2009 coup.

Meanwhile, his defense minister, Marlon Pascua, charged that the protests by teachers and other sections of the population were being funded from outside the country with counterfeit dollars. When asked what evidence he had to support such fantastic charges and who was providing the money, Pascua refused to say.

In a separate statement made in a television interview, Lobo’s minister of national security affirmed that the only way to solve the country’s problems was to “capture the national trade union leaders.”

Since Lobo first took office in January of last year, those responsible for the killings, torture, illegal detentions and other forms of state repression carried out in the wake of the June 2009 coup have enjoyed complete impunity. Michiletti was named a “congressman for life,” assuring him parliamentary immunity from prosecution, while the head of the country’s armed forces, Gen. Romeo Vasquez, was rewarded with an appointment to head Hondutel, the state telecommunications company.

The repression continues unabated. A report issued by Human Rights Watch last December, entitled “After the coup: ongoing violence, intimidation and impunity in Honduras,” documents 18 killings and 47 cases of threats or attacks against journalists, political activists and human rights advocates since Lobo’s inauguration in January 2010. In addition, the report detailed attacks by the security forces on opposition media, such as the assault by members of the military on Radio Union last September, in which teargas was lobbed into the station’s offices, equipment was destroyed and at least one person seriously injured.

Last week, Bertha Oliva, the coordinator of the Committee of Relatives of Disappeared Detainees (COFADEH), testified in Washington before the Inter-American

Commission on Human Rights. “You must not think that we live under a state of law,” she told the commission. “We live under state terrorism.” She added that human rights advocates in Honduras were “defenseless” and have “no right to make claims based on guarantees or rights violations.” COFADEH has documented 675 attacks on oppositionists and rights advocates in 2009 and 2010 as well as 65 since the beginning of this year. It has also recorded 12 murders of activists since Lobo’s inauguration.

Also last week, a Honduran Supreme Court judge overturned three arrest warrants for former President Zelaya, claiming that he was now free to return to Honduras. The judge let stand, however, corruption charges against the ousted president stemming from his alleged misuse of public office to promote a plebiscite on changing the Honduran constitution. His bid to amend this document, which was foisted on Honduras by the last military dictatorship and the US embassy in the 1980s, was the pretext for the coup.

Now that he is out, the Honduran legislature has quietly moved ahead to make similar constitutional changes, with no objections from the military or the ruling elite.

Zelaya, who is living in exile in the Dominican Republic, dismissed the court’s action as “absurd,” as he would still be prosecuted upon his return. He also said that he feared assassination if he were to set foot in Honduras.

The Obama administration restored full recognition to Honduras after Lobo’s inauguration and resumed economic and military aid last June. Last month, Lobo and US Ambassador Hugo Llorens signed a Letter of Agreement that will provide an additional \$1.75 million to support “efforts by Honduran law enforcement.”



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