

Mexican police arrest protesters in Juarez

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On November 1, some 150 police officers in Juarez, México attacked protesters who belong to a pacifist group, the Front of United Citizens (FPC), as they were pasting red paper crosses on a downtown wall in commemoration of the thousands of victims of the violence in this Mexican border city, just across the Rio Grande River from El Paso, Texas.

Mexican and international human rights organizations and student groups denounced the attack on the protest, calling for a public investigation of police misconduct and demanding that the government guarantee the right to freedom of speech and assembly. Calling it a “pretext” to violate human rights, Amnesty International rejected the claim of the security chief of the city, retired Colonel Julián Leyzaola, that the preservation of public order justified the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators.

Juarez is home to hundreds of sweatshop assembly plants (maquiladoras), including electronic assembly plants and parts plants for General Motors and other carmakers. Many of these plants have shut down as transnational companies scour the world for the cheapest labor resources available.

In addition to layoffs, Juarez workers have been hit with wage cuts. High unemployment and low wages are the root causes of drug addiction and violence in this city of 1.5 million people.

Since the Mexican Army occupied the city in 2006, some 10,000 Juarez residents have been killed, 4,000 of them less than 16 years old. “The official story is that all who are killed are delinquents,” said Hero Fong, an FPC spokesperson. “We are not acquainted with every case,” he added, “but what we do know is that too many young people and too many poor people are dying in this city.”

In this epidemic of deaths of young people, nearly 48 percent of the victims are males between the ages of 20 and 24. The deaths are routinely attributed to drug wars. Each dead youth is branded a member of a criminal gang.

President Felipe Calderon endorsed that view nearly two years ago, when he speculated that the 16 young

victims of one massacre must have been gang members. “They were probably killed by a rival group,” declared the president.

Skepticism over the claim that all those who have been killed by the army or the military police were criminals is widespread, as is a general distrust in the police and armed forces that occupy the city.

The role of the army and police forces under army command—militarized police—was exposed in a report released by Human Rights Watch on November 9. The document provides evidence of disappearances, torture and covert executions in 7 Mexican states, including Chihuahua, where Juarez is located.

In the words of this report: “The majority of the victims in the cases documented by Human Rights Watch were young men who came from lower or working class backgrounds. Many had families and small children. They had a variety of jobs: they were car mechanics and taxi drivers, factory and construction laborers.

“The victims also included police officers, women and children, and some white collar professionals and individuals with upper class backgrounds, including a university professor and an architect. The victims of these serious abuses—or their families in the cases of “disappeared” or murdered victims—declared that they were innocent of the wrongdoing of which they were accused and said that they had no knowledge of or ties to any illegal activity.”

On the day of the November 1 protest, the FPC was in the process of pasting 9,000 red crosses on lampposts, walls and monuments. On each cross the demonstrators wrote the name and age of a victim.

The confrontation ended with the arrest of 32 people, who were dragged along the street, pulled from their vehicles and threatened with automatic weapons. Half of the arrests took place at the demonstration. The others were arrested at the police station when FPC supporters arrived to protest the arrest of their comrades.

The police acted with impunity, despite the presence of reporters and cameramen, some of whom were also

manhandled. A journalist from El Proceso, a Mexico City news magazine, was hit in the head. In another incident, a police officer grabbed a tripod and swung it at a reporter's face. Two reporters were arrested together with the demonstrators. The Juarez daily El Diario de Juarez put together a 15 minute video of the incident.

Many of the police wore black ski masks, so as to avoid being identified. The officers acted under the direct orders of Leyzaola, who was appointed security chief in March. Leyzaola formerly commanded the police in Tijuana, where he became known for his heavy-handed methods and violations of human rights, including his involvement in the kidnapping and torture of suspects.

"I am not here to engage in dialogues with anyone," declared Leyzaola as he arrived at the scene of the protest. "You are all under arrest for disturbing the public order." The protesters have been charged with vandalizing storefronts, assaulting the police and endangering public health.

In reaction to the police assault, protesters demanded that police officers take off their masks and asserted their right to freely assemble and speak. Fong reported later that once in police custody, the jailed individuals were kicked and beaten. Also beaten by the municipal police while in custody were El Diario photographer Christian Torres and Radio Net reporter Ramiro Escobar.

Francisco Chávez, a lawyer for the protesters, declared that the message from the city and the Calderón administration was that the government will not tolerate any social movement. "The objective is to deal with social protest with an iron hand," said Chávez, "and this case is a clear demonstration."

Lending credibility to Chávez's statement was Leyzaola himself, who declared, "Excesses by pacifists will no longer be tolerated in Juarez."

The posting of crosses by FPC activists was intended as a critique of a business organized celebration of Juarez in October called "Competitive Juarez," in which thousands of smiling faces of Juarez residents were affixed to posts and walls around the town.

Among the guests of honor at that event was former New York City Mayor Rudi Giuliani, who currently heads a business and security consulting firm. In Mexico City his firm recommended that the city follow New York City's example and prosecute the "squeegee men" who clean car windows as a way of improving that city's "quality of life."

In preparation for the October event the municipal police "cleaned the city" by carrying out dragnets to

arrest and remove from the city center loiterers, beggars, drug addicts and street children.

President Calderón and the political elites blame the epidemic of deaths on "social decomposition" produced by moral turpitude in Juarez and other cities. The real cause of the violence that afflicts this city—on average 9 people are killed each night—is the collapse of employment. The closure of factories in Juarez has left an entire generation of youth without a future and driven many of them into addiction and crime. Over half the households live on less than 119 pesos a day, well short of the 938-peso minimum needed to stay above poverty.

Given the increase in food prices, as winter approaches many families in Juarez will face the choice of buying food or buying fuel to keep warm.

The 326 industrial plants that operate in Juarez are closely tied to the US and European economies. Eighty percent of Juarez's exports go to the United States. Consequently, in response to the 2008-2009 recession the transnational firms sacked nearly 100,000 workers, one-third of their entire workforce.

Jobs have also been destroyed as a result of technological changes. The average plant now employs 600 workers, down from 1500 a decade ago.

Thousands have been driven into the underground economy or forced to cross the US-Mexico border in search of work.

At plants that have not closed, real wages have fallen as transnational companies such as Electrolux, Delphi and Foxconn have taken advantage of the jobs crisis to intensify exploitation.



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