

Honduras's prison inferno: A crime of capitalism

Bill Van Auken
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The official death toll in the horrific fire that burned through the Comayagua prison in central Honduras on February 14 rose to 356 on Friday with the announcement that another hospitalized inmate had succumbed to third-degree burns.

The more that emerges about this immense tragedy, the more it becomes clear that those who died were victims of a state organized massacre, just as surely as if they had been gunned down by the military death squads that have played such a bloody role in Honduras's recent history.

On Thursday, reports surfaced that the blaze, first attributed to an electrical short circuit and then to a prisoner's cigarette igniting a mattress, was set intentionally by guards as a cover for a conspiracy involving better-off inmates who paid the warden to stage a prison escape. Honduran authorities are reportedly investigating the bank accounts of officials assigned to the facility.

Surviving prisoners have reported that they were fired upon as they tried to escape the flames and have called upon those doing the grim forensic work of identifying the victims to check the corpses for bullet wounds.

The firefighters who responded to the blaze have also testified to the gunfire. While they arrived within less than 10 minutes of being called, the call itself was not made until 20 minutes after the fire had started, and more precious time was lost as they were unable to go in for fear of being shot. By the time they began fighting the fire, it was too late to save anyone.

Prisoners and their families charged that guards failed to open cell doors, leaving the inmates to burn to death locked behind bars. Even if they had acted responsibly, there were only two guards actually inside the prison grounds to organize the rescue of 852 inmates. Authorities have acknowledged that there were no

existing plans for the facility's evacuation in event of an emergency.

The government of Honduras has acknowledged that nearly 60 percent of those imprisoned in Comayagua had not been convicted of any crime, but rather were either awaiting trial or had been thrown into jail as suspected gang members under draconian laws that allow police to detain individuals on no more evidence than having a tattoo.

If ever there was a disaster foretold, the Comayagua prison disaster was it. In 2004, a similar blaze killed 107 inmates at the prison in San Pedro Sula, Honduras's second-largest city, and the year before, 66 prisoners and three female visitors died in a massacre at the El Porvenir jail near the Caribbean coastal city of La Ceiba.

As recently as 2010, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights issued a report indicting the abysmal conditions in Honduran jails and demanding that the government take urgent action to address them. Since then, the Honduran government has only allowed conditions to worsen as it has imposed one austerity program after another, slashing wages and social conditions to improve profits for the country's dozen ruling families, the international banks and the transnational corporations that exploit low-wage labor in Honduras's assembly sweatshops, or *maquiladoras*.

The conditions in the prisons is an accurate barometer of prevailing social conditions in any country. In Honduras, they reflect a society that is among the most unequal in the world. The second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere after Haiti, it is ruled by a narrow oligarchy of landowners, industrialists and financiers, while 60 percent of the population subsists in poverty and 30 percent are unemployed.

The international media's response to this atrocity has

inevitably included references to Honduras's murder rate, the worst in the world with 82.1 per hundred thousand, compared to a 6.9 average globally, and to the role of the drug trade.

Virtually unmentioned, however, is Honduras's long and bloody history of state violence, which is intimately bound with its more than century-long oppression by US imperialism.

Invaded seven times by US Marines during the first three decades of the 20th century, Honduras was the scene of rampant state killings, torture and repression in the 1980s, when it served as the CIA's base of operations for the "contra" war against Nicaragua. It remains the site of the largest US military facility in Latin America, the Soto Cano Airbase, which this week supplied the Honduran authorities with 400 body bags for the Comayagua dead.

The country's corrupt and reactionary institutions and ruling elite have been shaped by a long series of US-backed military coups, the latest of which took place just two-and-a-half years ago with the indispensable backing of the Obama administration.

The country's current president, Porfirio Lobo, has managed to legitimize the bloody work of the June 2009 coup, while assuring all of its leaders complete impunity. The ousted ex-president Manuel Zelaya, who was frog-marched out of the presidential palace in his pajamas by Honduran troops in 2009, has made his peace with this regime. A wealthy landowner who earned the ire of his class with populist rhetoric, an alliance of convenience with Venezuela's Chavez and a minimum wage hike, Zelaya signed an accord with Lobo last May, endorsing the government's legitimacy and extolling the virtues of "democracy."

For the masses of Honduran working people, however, the criminal contempt shown for the lives of the prisoners at Comayagua is an accurate indicator of the real character of this so-called democracy, in which journalists, trade unionists, human rights activists, workers, peasants and others continue to die at the hands of death squads.

The intense popular outrage over the prison atrocity in Honduras has profound roots in the determination of Honduran workers to resist. The massacre at Comayagua only demonstrates once again that it is impossible to secure livable conditions, democratic rights and freedom from imperialist domination outside

of the independent mobilization of the working class in Honduras and throughout the Americas in the struggle to put an end to class oppression and build a socialist society.

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