

US Congress debates sanctions amid clashes in Venezuela

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The US Congress is moving toward a vote on imposing sanctions against Venezuela, as right-wing protesters and security forces clash in Caracas.

A “Venezuelan Human Rights and Democracy Protection Act” cleared the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Friday, and the Republican leadership said that it would likely pass the full House shortly. The leader of the Senate foreign relations panel, Democratic Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey, has signaled his support for the measure, but it is not clear whether the legislation will be approved in the upper house.

The legislation would target Venezuelan officials alleged to be responsible for human rights abuses for sanctions, including the freezing of US accounts and assets and the denial or revocation of visas.

The debate in the US Congress came as clashes resumed in the streets of the Venezuelan capital following the eviction and roundup of right-wing student protesters from four tent encampments that had been set up in the wealthier neighborhoods of eastern Caracas.

Some 900 police and National Guard members participated in the predawn raid, which resulted in the arrest of some 243 people. Among those detained were leaders of JAVU (United Active Youth of Venezuela), an extreme right-wing student group which has been a major recipient of funding from US agencies such as USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy. Also arrested were members of Bandera Roja, an ex-Maoist organization that has aligned itself with the extreme right.

Venezuelan authorities presented to the media materials removed from the tent encampments, which included firearms, tear gas grenades, gasoline bombs, fireworks and other weapons, as well as drugs and quantities of US dollars.

The authorities released to their parents 12 minors who were among those arrested. The others detained were to be brought to court on Friday.

The crackdown on the camps triggered a new wave of street protests, after several weeks of relative quiescence that followed the initiation of a “dialogue” between the government of President Nicolás Maduro and the right-wing opposition coalition known as MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable).

In the course of the clashes Thursday, one 25-year-old member of the National Guard was shot to death by a sniper, bringing the death toll since the right-wing protests began three months ago to 42. Another Guard member was shot and wounded.

The protests began on February 12 under the slogan of *la salida* or the exit, meaning the forcing out of the elected president, Maduro, through street violence. They have been led by a “hardline” section of the right-wing opposition that includes figures who have a long history of collaboration with and funding from USAID and the NED.

These include the now jailed Leopoldo López, a former mayor who played a prominent role in the abortive 2002 US-backed coup against the late ex-president Hugo Chávez, and María Corina Machado, a deputy who also supported the coup.

This layer has rejected the “dialogue” and called for continued protests, even as the bulk of the MUD leadership has embraced the talks.

The debate over sanctions in Washington has largely paralleled this division within the Venezuelan right. The US assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, Roberta Jacobson, testified Thursday before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US Senate arguing that sanctions would be counterproductive at this moment given the ongoing

“dialogue” between the Maduro government and the Venezuelan right.

“One thing we will not do is remain silent in the face of Venezuelan government assaults on fundamental freedoms,” said Jacobson, while adding, “We regard the dialogue currently underway with cautious optimism.”

While saying that the MUD leadership did not want sanctions, she tipped her hat to the hardline Venezuelan rightists. The “Venezuelan opposition is not monolithic,” she acknowledged, and elements opposed dialogue with the government. “They all need to be heard,” she said, signaling the two-track approach being pursued by Washington in its drive for regime change. On the one hand, the Obama administration backs “dialogue,” and, on the other, it supports continued street violence and worse.

The first—and for the moment preferred—track is that of using the “political dialogue” brokered by the foreign ministers of Brazil, Colombia and other Latin American nations as well as the Vatican to push the Maduro government ever further to the right and pave the way for a “transition” to a government aligned with US foreign policy in the region.

At the same time, the government has organized conferences on “economic peace” and to promote an “economic offensive” in which it has essentially appealed to Venezuela’s ruling financial and corporate layers—who control 70 percent of the country’s economy, more than before the advent of Chávez’s “Bolivarian Socialism”—to draw up economic proposals that would boost their productivity and profits as a strategy for “national development.”

While ostensibly this approach is aimed at countering the combined ills of rampant inflation, shortages of commodities and stagnant growth, the effect is to impose the full burden of the economic crisis on the backs of the Venezuelan working class.

The government has offered public financing to private businesses, including from Venezuela’s Fund for National Development and the Chinese Venezuelan Fund, which is based on loans from Beijing. At the same time, it has carried out a series of devaluations aimed at putting more foreign exchange in the hands of Venezuela’s capitalists, while slashing the real value of workers’ wages.

The appeal for the capitalists to tell the government

what they need to boost productivity has predictably translated into demands for the lifting of restraints on job cutting and an end to price controls. There are already signs that the government is complying. Layoffs have been allowed at a number of firms, in violation of Venezuela’s labor laws. Meanwhile, prices of basic commodities are rising rapidly, while the government recently implemented a 40 percent hike in public transit fares and is reportedly preparing cuts in subsidies on electricity and gasoline.

These policies will inevitably provoke anger and unrest among the masses of Venezuelan workers and poor, who have viewed the protests organized by parties representing the old ruling oligarchy with hostility, even as they have become increasingly dissatisfied with the policies of Maduro, whose approval rating has fallen to an all-time low of 37 percent.

When the working class begins to come into struggle over these issues, there is no doubt that the repressive measures that have been employed to quell the street violence of the right will be turned with redoubled force against it.

Washington and its clients in the leadership of the Venezuelan right are counting on these policies to continue weakening popular support for the government and pave the way for its removal and replacement with a more pliant regime. As in 2002, the most likely instruments for such an exercise in regime change would be the political right and big business, with whom Maduro is now in dialogue, and the military, which forms the key pillar of his so-called Bolivarian Socialist government.

The only answer to this threat can come from the independent political mobilization of the Venezuelan working class in the fight to put an end to capitalism and establish a workers’ government and genuine socialism.



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