

Venezuelan National Guard guns down protesting steelworkers

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National Guard troops opened fire on protesting steelworkers Monday at the SIDOR steel mill in the industrial zone of Ciudad Guayana, in Venezuela's southeastern Bolívar State.

At least three workers were wounded by shotgun blasts in the confrontation, while others were overcome by tear gas, which was also fired in an attempt to break up their protest over the failure of the government of President Nicolás Maduro to negotiate a labor contract that expired more than four years ago.

The troops, backed by armored cars, attacked the workers when they assembled outside the plant gate and again when they attempted to block the main road linking Ciudad Guayana to the rest of the country.

The workers who were shot were identified as William Castillo, Johan Pérez and Jesús Verde. According to one report, Pérez was shot in the chest with a bullet, while the other two workers were hit by shotgun fire.

The National Guard arrested at least 14 steelworkers after chasing them into the plant, and security forces raided the homes of at least two union officials. In an act of crude vindictiveness, the armed troops also entered the plant's parking lot and smashed windshields, flattened tires and otherwise damaged workers' vehicles.

Clashes erupted again on Tuesday morning when hundreds of steelworkers, joined by workers from other industries in the area, marched from the steel plant to the local Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) barracks to demand the release of those who had been taken prisoner the day before. When the workers tried to block a National Guard truck, troops again opened fire with shotguns and tear gas canisters. Another three workers were wounded and six more detained in the fray.

The militarized confrontation with the SIDOR (Siderúrgica del Orinoco) steelworkers has exposed the real class character of the Maduro government and the program of so-called "21st Century Socialism" inaugurated by his late predecessor, Hugo Chávez. The repressive action had been prepared over the course of several weeks, with official slanders and denunciations of the workers. The objective is to suppress not only this section of the working class, but to intimidate all Venezuelan workers in preparation for the implementation of a reactionary capitalist "readjustment" plan.

Initiating the public campaign against the steelworkers was Diosdado Cabello, the president of the National Assembly. A former military officer who participated in the abortive 1992 coup attempt led by Chávez, Cabello is perhaps the wealthiest member of the ruling circle in Venezuela. With close ties to the "Bolivarian Revolution's" two most important constituencies—the military, which controls the bulk of top government positions on the state and federal level; and the so-called *boliburguesia*, the capitalist layer that has enriched itself off of the country's oil revenues, government contracts and official corruption—Cabello is widely seen as Maduro's rival for power.

On July 23, barely an hour before a negotiating session was supposed to have begun, Cabello went on national television flanked by other top officials and announced that the government was not going to negotiate with a "union mafia," which he blamed for not only the protracted contract impasse at SIDOR, but the catastrophic fall in production at the plant as well. He went on to call leaders of the union—which have previously been seen as supporters of the Chávez government—as "liars," "traitors" and "thugs."

He also accused the union of demanding an 800,000

bolivares (\$127,000) bonus for each worker as a condition for signing the contract, a grotesque falsification of the actual demand of 80 bolivares (less than \$13).

The statements provoked outrage throughout the workforce in the region's industrial sector, and were answered with a mass march through Ciudad Guayana on July 28, which was staged in defiance of a heavy-handed military deployment in the city.

The denunciations of the SIDOR workers were then amplified by President Maduro, who made them a central theme at the congress of the ruling PSUV (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela) at the end of last month. He claimed that "corrupt trade unionists have kidnapped the company and have brought it to the point of breakdown." Maduro described the SIDOR workers as "anarcho-syndicalists" in "the pay of the US Embassy," and accused them of "playing the game of the right," referring to the US-backed right-wing parties that staged violent anti-government protests beginning earlier this year, leading to 43 deaths.

Behind all of the pseudo-socialist rhetoric, it was Maduro who responded to these demonstrations by appealing to the right and to the country's big business and financial sectors for "peace" and "dialogue," even as his government turned viciously against the workers. It proposed to create more profitable conditions, including through the creation of Chinese-style free enterprise zones.

As for SIDOR, the steel company has been brought to the brink of collapse not by the workers but by the government, which has starved it of supplies, parts and investment, leading to the breakdown of large parts of the mill and sending production falling last year to just 1.5 million tons of liquid steel, compared to 4.3 million tons in 2007. That was the year before the Chávez government nationalized the company in order to resolve a protracted and tumultuous strike against its private owner, the Italian-Argentine consortium Ternium-Techint.

In point of fact, the company was renationalized, having been created as a state-owned industry under the military dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez in the 1950s to supply the national oil industry, and then privatized in 1997.

The Chávez-Maduro governments, however, have driven much of the country's industrial infrastructure

into the ground, relying on high oil prices and finance capital to keep the country afloat. In the case of SIDOR, the government contracted with a Chinese firm to supply tubing for the state oil company previously produced by the Venezuelan steelmaker.

While the Chávez government approved \$314 million in 2012 for SIDOR's development, management claims that only 27 percent of this amount has been allocated, while other sources suggest that the entire appropriation went missing.

Diosdado Cabello served as a member of the company's board of directors—which would appear to have constituted a genuine "mafia"—though he reportedly attended none of its meetings, nor ever set foot in the steel plant itself.

Among the demands made by the SIDOR workers is that the government explain the meaning of documents leaked to the media last month indicating that a deal is being negotiated to place the company under the management of a Chinese capitalist enterprise. It is widely believed that the government is attempting to break the workers' resistance in preparation for SIDOR's re-privatization.

The confrontation has wider implications, however. Among the few concrete issues discussed at last month's congress of the PSUV was a proposal to raise the price of gasoline, which is the cheapest in the world in Venezuela. The floating of this measure is in preparation for what is reported to be a much wider "adjustment" program, including the easing of price controls and another devaluation of the bolivar, the national currency.

With the inflation rate already approaching 60 percent, the measures are expected to push it even higher. According to one analysis, the results would include a 14 percent fall in real wages.

Under these conditions, the violent crackdown on the SIDOR workers may prove only the beginning of an explosive confrontation between the Maduro government and the Venezuelan working class.



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