

Strikes and demonstrations spread in Venezuela amid deepening food crisis

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Food riots and looting have become widespread across Venezuela in recent weeks, with leading opposition politicians warning of the threat of social revolution.

On the specious pretext of a threatened foreign invasion, the government of President Nicholas Maduro has imposed a state of emergency to crack down on demonstrations. Reuters reported Monday that three people were killed in food riots over the past week, all of them having succumbed to bullet wounds.

On June 6, in the western state of Tachira, a police officer used a shotgun to kill 42-year-old Jenny Ortiz after hundreds of residents gathered outside of a warehouse, drawn there by a rumor that there was food inside.

In Sucre on June 8, a 21-year-old man was killed when the Bolivarian National Guard attacked a hungry crowd, wounding 10.

The lack of food threatens millions of workers and pauperized middle class people with the specter of starvation. A count by the Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict showed 10 instances of looting, with crowds of hundreds of people demonstrating in working class neighborhoods across the country. In the last five months there have been 2,779 protests across the country, according to the organization.

Ninety percent of the population is without basic foodstuffs and other necessary consumer goods, while the ruling class, including the pro-Chavez/Maduro Bolivarian bourgeoisie (known as the Boliborgesia), purchases food on the thriving black market. The government recently announced that food distribution would be carried out by local food and production committees (CLAP), allowing United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) supporters to hoard food and starve out workers who oppose the government.

In recent weeks, food riots have developed into spontaneous demonstrations. In one recent manifestation held in early June, workers who had been waiting in line for 12 hours to no avail decided to march on the Miraflores presidential palace in Caracas. The broadcaster Telemundo cited demonstrators shouting, “We want food for the people who are dying of hunger.” Protesters were attacked by Bolivarian National Guard forces and prevented from reaching the palace.

On Monday, bus drivers launched a national strike in as many as 14 states. According to initial reports, the strike has effectively shut down bus transit in many cities, leaving terminals empty. Fearing the emergence of a strike wave, the Maduro government has responded by quickly calling for strikers to be jailed. Jose Vielma, the PSUV governor of Tachira State, said: “Prosecutors have to act diligently because in cases against the peace we must defend the peace and the nation.”

There is fear of social revolution in both the pro-Maduro “Chavista” faction of the ruling class and the opposition, led by the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD).

The ruling class is itself deeply divided. While the Bolivarian section is determined to stifle social opposition through mass repression, the opposition is internally split. Though in agreement that social protest is to be crushed by force, one faction of the opposition favors an accommodation with the PSUV while another supports a recall referendum aimed at deposing Maduro.

Henri Falcon, governor of the state of Lara, warned that a “social explosion” was imminent. Falcon, a former leader of the PSUV who broke with Chavez in 2010 and joined the opposition, made clear the purpose

of the recall referendum campaign:

“The referendum is an escape valve,” he said Thursday. “We are not only betting on the referendum, we understand that it is the only democratic, constitutional way out.”

MUD leader Henrique Capriles spoke to EuroNews on Sunday and said: “If we don’t have a recall vote this year, there will be social turmoil--society will erupt as a result of the growing daily tension.”

Last week, the National Electoral Commission announced it had accepted signatures on petitions to commence the complicated recall process, which would likely be drawn out over many months. The Maduro government appealed the decision to the country’s highest court on Monday.

Attempts to broker a truce between the government and the opposition were rejected by imprisoned far-right wing opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez. Though Maduro allowed former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero to visit Lopez in prison last week and called for an “open and inclusive dialogue” with the opposition, Lopez refused to agree to negotiations with the government.

Lopez tweeted on June 5: “I told [Zapatero] there is no conversation or dialogue one can have in the popular interest: bring on the constitutional change in 2016.”

Zapatero, who visited Venezuela with the backing of the ex-presidents of Panama and the Dominican Republic, said on June 8 that negotiations were breaking down. In an article in Sunday’s *Wall Street Journal*, the newspaper voiced its frustration with the Argentine government of Mauricio Macri for holding up discussions at the Organization of American States (OAS) General Assembly meeting being held this week in the Dominican Republic. An attempt by OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro to sanction Venezuela appears unlikely to succeed.



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