

Thousands of teachers strike as Costa Rican unions suppress struggle

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Last Thursday in San José, Costa Rica, about 5,000 workers and youth marched to the Legislative Assembly as part of a strike convoked by the Association of Teachers of Secondary Schools (APSE) union against wage stagnation, regressive taxes and legislative bills threatening to cut their pensions and other benefits that Congress began discussing that same day.

APSE has been the most active union protesting these historic attacks against workers, having brought relatively large contingents out on strikes in recent years, as well as in April and June of this year. The union was excluded from a collective agreement with the Ministry of Education (MEP) as reprisal for the strike in June.

The diminishing participation of workers in these demonstrations reflects their growing conviction that neither the union leaderships nor the political parties working with them are defending their interests, but are instead working behind their backs towards a deal with the government.

This policy has been developed through decades of betrayals against workers, which have led to a sharp fall in membership for APSE and other unions. While in 1984 the unionization rate reached a peak of 15 percent, today it has fallen to about 9 percent.

Carlos, a retired electrician who worked 40 years for the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE), joined the demonstration to oppose the attacks of the government. He complained that “unions just take money from workers”. The union that he was part of, the National Association of Workers in Energy, Telecommunications and Related Sectors (ANTTEA) of the Patria Justa union coalition, allowed his pension to be reduced to less than half of his salary, while it “has taken money [bribes] from more than one.”

Speaking about the cost of his sons’ and daughters’ education, Carlos commented, “sometimes we don’t eat meat to buy books.”

Yamileth, a school custodian for 21 years and a member of APSE, marched with her grandson Santiago. “We can only defend our work benefits out here on the street, not with negotiations. We are sending an ultimatum [to the government] today,” she said.

She was angry “that they want to increase our retirement age and now they are pushing through dual education, which will turn 14-year-old students into free labor for companies.” She also expressed how outrageous it was that public employees will only receive a 10 colones increase for every 100,000 colones (about \$US180) in their salaries, or 0.01 percent.

The current historic assault is directed against not only public sector workers, but also the social conditions of all workers and

youth. The increase in the regressive sales tax from 10 to 13 percent and the austerity measures in health and education during the Rafael Ángel Calderón FUSC (Social Christian Unity Party) administration (1990-1994) and the unity government of José María Figueres and Calderón (1994-1998)—comparable to the 15 percent added-value tax and social cuts being prepared today—led to massive growth in unemployment, poverty and the informal sector, as well as rising school desertion and the reappearance of formerly eradicated illnesses like dengue.

The Citizens’ Action Party (PAC) administration of incumbent President Luis Guillermo Solís and the Costa Rican ruling class as a whole are preparing for an intensification of the class struggle as the breakdown of social conditions intensifies. Already, the employment rate has fallen sharply for the past two years, reaching an abysmal 51.8 percent in the second trimester of 2016, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), making it the lowest in Latin America by a significant margin, according to Economic Commission for Latin America data.

Fewer people are seeking jobs, thus keeping the unemployment rate steady at around 9.5 percent, still one of the highest in the region, while real wages have fallen 3 percent and the poverty rate and informality have climbed steadily since 2010.

According to the central government budget for 2017, 44 percent of the budgetary increase from 2016 will be for debt payments. Accumulated debt is expected to climb to 49 percent of GDP next year. This vast accumulation of public debt with currently low interest rates represents a deliberately reckless situation that could make social services collapse. An estimated 67 percent of the 2017 education budget will be financed through debt.

The Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration are holding up on further financing until the value-added tax gets implemented, placing further stress on state expenditures.

If the new tax doesn’t get approved, President Solís insisted on Thursday, “we are going to make the Police Force compete for the resources of public education, public health, housing, and everything else.”

Another measure by the ruling elite is to tighten up the “tripartite agreement” between employers, the State and the unions, as stressed by the new minister of labor, Carlos Quesada, appointed in May.

In June 2015, the Patria Justa union coalition signed an agreement with the leaderships of pseudo-left Frente Amplio party

and the ruling PAC, called “Patriotic Agenda for the Common Good,” which explicitly supports the current reactionary agenda of the government: “To carry out the political and civic control needed to guarantee the efficiency and effectiveness in the execution of public institution budgets, without any surplus,” the statement declares.

Ottón Solís, the founder of the ruling PAC, and Oscar Arias, the former PLN (National Liberation Party) president, have been working together to form a “national unity government” for the 2018 elections, which, according to Solís in an interview on Saturday with the far-right newspaper *La Nación*, enjoys the support “of a majority of the PLN directory. Weeks ago, Frente Ampio [and] the PUSC responded positively.” This project would count on either the explicit support or implicit obedience of the union bureaucracies.

Frente Ampio also agreed to negotiate with Arias for this partnership, something which would have been unheard of last year, when the party still opposed the right-wing agenda that they now support in Congress.

The *WSWS* also spoke to Félix, a music high school teacher, who insisted that voting for Frente Ampio and its presidential candidate, José María Villalta, “is not going to solve anything, just like [the current president] Luis Guillermo, they are just taking advantage of us.” When asked whether the unions were doing what was necessary to defend their interests, he replied that they are not and commented on how the situation is getting direr for workers. He added, “But watch out for some *Comandante Zero* [the Sandinista militia leader], a Castro or another guerrilla. They won’t help either.”

While one of the other two large teacher unions, the Education Workers Union (SEC), participated in the strike last week, the National Association of Teachers (ANDE), which participates in the Costa Rican Social and Union Block (BUSSCO), did not support this week’s strike nor the one in June.

The divisions between the unions, Félix explained, are due to the fact that all other unions focus on negotiating with the government officials, but at least APSE is “still more interested in supporting workers.”

However, APSE is financially and historically tied to the government and to the less active ANDE. Financially, the Ministry of Education (MEP) is the one responsible for extracting the 1 percent fee from teachers’ salaries that go to the education unions, and the pension and life insurance funds are administered by ANDE. Historically, APSE split from ANDE in 1955 as an “apolitical” union and was given access to MEP buildings and vehicles in its initial stages. Ultimately, the APSE leaders’ main interest is to continue having the support of the government so as to secure administrative posts, including a seat in the Superior Education Council, the commission on salaries, and others.

Both members of APSE, Yamileth and Félix, responded that there had not been any real efforts by APSE to make the struggle international, fighting for democratic rights and better living conditions internationally and appealing for the support of teachers and other workers abroad. The leaderships of both APSE and ANDE only make empty statements of support for broad groups like the teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico, or, in the case of ANDE,

support for “left-turn” governments in Latin America.

The union leadership, including the reformist currents within the unions led by smaller nominally left parties, are aware of the implication of the intensification of the class struggle.

Martha Rodríguez, secretary general of the National Union of Workers of the Social Security Department (UNDECA) a leading member of BUSSCO, recently explained, “We are talking about a reduction in income for public workers that will affect unemployment, generate a reduction in the ability to acquire goods and services.” She concluded, “Services will deteriorate and that is how privatization would get justified.”

In spite of this grave warning, the UNDECA, ANDE and other leaderships in BUSSCO have insisted on helplessly appealing to the deaf ears of the parties in Congress. On July 21, they interrupted a session of the Legislative Assembly to yell from the visitors’ gallery and show placards with personal insults aimed at the politicians. These are the sort of actions that Gilberto Cascante, the president of ANDE, has been trying to pass off as the realization of the “indefinite strike” that workers are demanding, which he said “had already begun” back in June.

The only way for teachers and other workers in Costa Rica to protect themselves is to seek political independence from bourgeois parties and union bureaucracies, whose class composition has been predominantly petty bourgeois and which have historically defended bourgeois rule and capitalist exploitation. These forces’ “left” statements are aimed at politically disarming the most militant workers in order to suppress the class struggle and facilitate the assault against the living standards and democratic rights of all workers and youth in the service of the Costa Rican ruling elite and US imperialism.



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