

Demonstrations grow in Nicaragua after Ortega suspends pension cuts

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Mass demonstrations took place across Nicaragua yesterday against an executive decree that drastically cuts pensions and requires workers and employers to contribute more to the near-bankrupt Nicaraguan Social Security Institute (INSS). The protests grew even after President Daniel Ortega, the former commander of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN), canceled the proposed pension reform that was demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

After nearly a week of protests, the Red Cross reports 428 injured and anti-government NGOs say 27 were dead by Sunday.

The demonstrations began last Wednesday with marches by pensioners and public university students in Managua and León. Over the next few days, the protests spread to other major cities and towns across the country and have increased in size and militancy in response to deadly repression by the state forces. Sandinista youth groups have also functioned as pro-government shock groups, inflicting violence on demonstrators.

After criminalizing protests and threatening to step up the repression on Saturday, Ortega retreated Sunday, calling for negotiations with business organizations, trade unions and the Catholic Church.

The right wing is intervening in the demonstrations to calm social tensions and block the growth of opposition to Ortega's capitalist government. Although the IMF reform was intended to make Nicaragua a more attractive investment for Wall Street and foreign capital—a prospect which the top business organization, Cosep, welcomes—big business has disagreements with the way the plan was implemented.

First, they opposed the pension reform measure from the right, demanding lower contributions from business. Second, they fear the measure was introduced

in a provocative manner and are now engaged in a full scale effort to pre-empt working class opposition, including by locking out employees Monday and urging workers to participate in a march in the capital, Managua, against the reform. Cosep has collaborated closely with the FSLN government on economic policy since Ortega returned to power in 2007, but is now using the demonstrations to pressure the government for further pro-business concessions.

After the temporary cancellation of the decree, the official FSLN press claims that “everything has gone back to normal” were revealed as wishful thinking.

Tensions remain at fever pitch. The demands of the protests by university students and demonstrators across the country has grown to include demands that the government halt state repression. On Sunday night, police brutally cracked down on student protesters at the Polytechnic University (Upoli) in Managua. Students had formed barricades to defend themselves from the anti-riot police and pro-government groups, and the crackdown left four students dead. There are growing popular calls for overthrowing the Ortega government.

The authorities described the Upoli crackdown as a “clash between gangs” and denied any police involvement. They also announced the second death of a police officer, which occurred on Saturday, a further signal that the death toll will continue to mount.

On Monday, the demonstration organized by Cosep was joined by tens of thousands with Nicaraguan flags who marched toward Upoli to accompany the students.

The government deployed the military in some areas after government and FSLN buildings were attacked and burned on Friday night. A spokesperson for the army announced that starting Monday all “vital areas” in Managua would be occupied, including the main

highways entering the city, presumably to prevent roadblocks. Classes have been canceled since last Friday until further notice and the US embassy instructed the families of its officials to leave the country.

The US State Department released its first press statement on the protests, condemning the violence “by police and others against civilians” and urging calm. On Monday, three US House representatives who are sponsoring the Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act, led by Republican Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, denounced the crackdown and called on the Senate to take up their bill, which would cut credit access to the country from international financial institutions until it “takes significant steps to restore democratic order.”

These imperialist machinations, however, have nothing to do with respecting democratic rights. The US has orchestrated countless coups, carried out invasions to install puppet regimes, and regularly conducted electoral fraud across the region to “elect” pro-Wall Street leaders. Most recently, the US backed the electoral fraud and bloody repression by the death-squad regime in Honduras last November, which left up to 30 protesters dead.

The main concern of Washington is that the FSLN bureaucracy has sought to maneuver between economic and military ties with the US and its two main rivals, Russia and China. For instance, the Nicaraguan military has recently carried out military exercises with both US and Russian troops and called on both countries to help replenish its equipment.

As the US deepens its global confrontation against Russia and China, it is increasing its pressure on the Ortega government to bow down to US demands to undercut its rivals’ influence from Central America. In this way, sections of the Nicaraguan elite more closely aligned with US imperialism, like the opposition Broad Front for Democracy (FAD), have used the genuine mass protests against pension cuts as a means to advance this pro-imperialist agenda.

This is highlighted by the murder of journalist Ángel Gahona whose death was captured on Facebook live on Saturday. Gahona ran a local news program in Bluefields where he was covering protests against the INSS reform when he was shot in the head, apparently by a sharpshooter.

The government claimed Gahona worked for the pro-

FSLN Channel 6 and that he was killed by “right-wing criminal groups.” However, Gahona’s wife and colleague told the BBC that he was targeted for reporting the repression. Another journalist at the scene, Ileana Lacayo, presented herself as an “organizer of the protests” along with Gahona, and declared on 100% Noticias, a channel censored by the government, that the government itself was to blame for Gahona’s death.

Ileana Lacayo identifies herself on social media as a journalist for the program Community Action for Reading and Security (CARS), which, along with a similar program called CARSI, are the top-listed receivers of USAID money so far in 2018 (just under \$1 million each), supposedly to help at-risk youth. However, Lacayo sought to separate her own “peaceful march” from the “independent” angry protests Saturday night by youth in Bluefields, located in the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region. Pro-US elements close to Cosep are likely involved in the demonstrations in an attempt to take advantage of genuine opposition to pension reforms and channel protests in a right-wing direction.

However, the demonstrations are of a popular, left-wing character. Students have denounced the fact that their older family members who receive a meager income, on average about \$150 a month, which will be cut 5 percent (alongside cuts of 12 percent for future pensioners). The FSLN has demonstrated since it came to power in 1979 that it is a defender of the interests of the national bourgeoisie and a collaborator with US imperialism.



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