

# Washington announces plans to pressure Nicaragua after largest demonstrations in 40 years

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Demonstrations in Nicaragua paused Tuesday after the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) government of President Daniel Ortega released groups of arrested demonstrators and abstained from violently breaking student barricades with lethal force. Roughly 30 people have been killed in ongoing protests so far.

Following Monday's mass demonstrations in the capital Managua and across the country, the government and business groups have agreed to enter into negotiations in an effort to reduce tensions and bring the mass discontent to heel.

Protests began last Wednesday as public university students, workers and pensioners expressed outrage at the government's implementation of dramatic pension cuts and an increase in worker contributions to the Social Security Instituto (INSS). The plan also demanded increases in employer contributions, and so the main business groups in the country have also intervened to both contain the demonstrations and channel discontent behind their own right-wing austerity demands. The pension reform plan was supported by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Wall Street credit agencies.

The Trump administration is increasingly concerned about the growth of opposition among the impoverished masses of Nicaragua and is intensifying its intervention in order to solidify its iron grip on Central America. On Tuesday, a senior advisor of the State Department, Michael Kozak, warned that Washington will "put more and more pressure" on the Nicaraguan government, including economic sanctions. Kozak postured as supportive of demonstrations, claiming the administration was "supporting the people in those countries that are trying to bring about change, and we try to do that through a variety of means." The former deputy and assistant secretary of state described the developments in

Nicaragua as "a long litany of torture [and] extrajudicial killing."

Washington's hypocrisy is extreme, as usual. Kozak himself served as the special presidential envoy to Panama during the 1989 invasion during which US forces extrajudicially killed thousands of Panamanian civilians, intentionally targeting slum neighborhoods to have maximum impact on the government of Manuel Noriega.

There is growing concern that massive levels of social inequality and violence are creating conditions that could produce a Latin American version of the 2011 Arab Spring demonstrations, which sent tens of millions of workers and youth into the streets. Ortega's decision to brutally repress demonstrations against pension cuts has underscored the reactionary, pro-capitalist character of self-proclaimed "socialists" like Ortega. Across Latin America, the anti-worker, capitalist policies and collaborationist policies vis-a-vis US imperialism have discredited all the governments that comprise the so-called "pink-tide" movement of "left" bourgeois rule.

These fears on the part of US imperialism were reflected in two editorials in leading US publications.

The *Washington Post* wrote an editorial Tuesday asserting that "protests have taken on a life of their own and reflect frustrations much wider than the social security cutbacks... Even if Mr. Ortega and [vice-president] Ms. Murillo ride out this short-term crisis, their people will not soon forget what they have just experienced." The editorial issued a half-criticism, noting that "order and a growing economy are this regime's justifications for denying liberty."

Over the weekend, the *New York Times* also noted worriedly that "the Roman Catholic Church provided refuge to students as it became increasingly unclear whether the church, the business community or any other

interlocutor could step in and resolve the growing crisis."

Similarly, Nicaragua's conservative press fears Ortega has "lost all political capacity and moral authority to keep ruling", like *La Prensa* wrote on Monday. The *Washington Post* suggested that Ortega should not "cling to power until it is too late."

Nicaragua serves as a key strategic battlefield between the United States, which has dominated the region for over a century (including before and during the Nicaraguan civil war when the US supported dictator Anastasio Somoza and then backed anti-Sandinista death squad "contras" throughout the 1980s), and China, which has made key investments in the country in recent years.

Ortega has made efforts to appease US imperialism. In November 2017, the FSLN-dominated National Assembly approved a significant defense initiative with the United States. The deal allowed an unspecified amount of US military equipment to be donated to Nicaragua for "military security and to combat drug trafficking." The deal also sent 12 US training advisors, 40 soldiers from Joint Task Force-Bravo, two Black Hawk and two Chinook helicopters, as well as additional advisors. In other words, the equipment once used by the contras to massacre peasants and assassinate workers is now being used by the Nicaraguan military, which fired upon workers in the streets throughout the country last week.

The relationship that Nicaragua has sought to develop with US imperialism is not without complications. In February, the *South China Morning Post* reported that the Chinese-led Nicaragua Canal project is "going ahead slowly." Though the canal is only getting underway, the *Morning Post* noted that it would "give China a major foothold in Central America, a region long dominated by the United States."

The project was launched on Ortega's initiative in 2013 to challenge US control of the Panama Canal to the south. At the same time, Nicaragua has at times denied Chinese corporations permission to continue building the canal in a further sign that the US is bringing its pressure to bear on the country.

The relative calm across Nicaragua yesterday is an indication that US imperialism is working out a new framework which it will force Ortega to accept if he wishes to remain in power. All indications are that Ortega will accept whatever new demands are placed on him by the Trump administration.

On Monday and Tuesday, dozens of students that were detained in previous days were freed, some with their heads shaved and without shoes. Many described getting

beaten up by the guards. By Monday, the previously censored channels were back on air. Elementary and high schools resumed classes on Wednesday.

The president of the main business confederation, Cosep, declared Tuesday that Ortega had fulfilled their demands, adding, "Now we are just waiting for the Episcopalian Conference to make its decision" to convoke the dialogue, referring to Ortega's announcement that the Catholic Church will mediate the talks.

The country's public university students have rejected the government and big businesses detente. Having suffered the brunt of the repression, the Polytechnic University (Upoli) students that have occupied the University formed a group called the "Self-convoked University Community of April 19," which published a statement on Tuesday.

In the statement, the students insist that protests began peacefully against the INSS reform. The students denounce the government repression that has killed 29, including students. The students have called for a "national university strike" in the main public and private universities across the country to demand the release of all protesters, an end to the repression, freedom of expression and the resignation of the police chiefs, Daniel Ortega and his wife and Vice President Rosario Murillo.

Regardless of whether the Ortega-US-Cosep strategic retreat causes demonstrations to subside, mass working class anger against growing inequality has not subsided. This anger provoked the largest demonstrations since the 1978-79 uprising which ousted the Somoza dictatorship.

A warning must be made to workers across Latin America. Spontaneous opposition to inequality and imperialism, however legitimate, can be manipulated by American imperialism and the corrupt national bourgeoisie to bring about an even further shift to the right in the politics of any country. There is no substitute for revolutionary leadership. The *World Socialist Web Site* calls for workers and youth to contact the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and construct sections of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) throughout Central and South America.



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