

Mass May Day protests in Costa Rica ahead of inauguration of right-wing government

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Thousands of workers in Costa Rica took to the streets twice this week in the run up to the inauguration of the new right-wing government elected in the April elections. The convening of a coalition government consisting of all the major capitalist parties marks an attempt by the ruling class to fortify itself in order to impose a long list of austerity measures demanded by Wall Street. The coalition government amounts to the most right-wing government in the country's history since the Tinoco dictatorship during World War I.

On May 8, president-elect Carlos Alvarado of the incumbent Citizens Action Party (PAC) will take power despite receiving only 21 percent of the votes in the first round of the elections in February. Alvarado won the second round against the previously weak National Restoration Party (PRN) amid historically low turnout levels.

The ruling class fears that the implementation of austerity measures is laying the basis for new social explosions. In his last address to Congress on Wednesday, outgoing President Luis Guillermo Solís warned that the “old bipartisan presidencies” have given way to “inevitable turbulence as old structures break down... In some scenarios these tensions have been dealt with through violence and in other times with reforms.”

Though boasting an unremarkable political history, 38-year-old president-elect Alvarado demonstrated to the ruling elite his willingness to attack the working class, particularly the most militant sections of public-sector workers. During his one year as Labor Minister under the Guillermo Solís government, he negotiated historic benefit cuts for employees of the state banks, ports, and oil refineries. He implemented the new Labor Code that added criminal penalties for public-sector strikes and facilitated mass firings, and also imposed a new minimum-salary formula for the private sector that is rapidly falling in terms of real purchasing power.

All the major trade unions have formed agreements with the incoming PAC administration that were mediated by the pseudo-left Broad Front (Frente Amplio) party. The unions

also lined up behind Alvarado in the elections but are calling for “critical support” of recent demonstrations in order to preempt any independent opposition.

On April 25, the unions called a one-day strike to let off steam and harness growing social opposition.

The turnout was immense. All hospitals, excluding emergency services, as well as schools, public universities, trains and other public services were brought to a halt to protest the despised “tax combo” that the new government aims to take up first. This includes a regressive added-value tax, which would subject a swath of new goods and services to the current sales tax that targets workers and the poor.

Another major demonstration to protest these reactionary policies was organized by the trade unions and their pseudo-left backers on May Day in downtown San José. The unions conducted the march so that it deliberately avoided the Congress building where the new legislators were being inaugurated at the same time.

Drowning out any discussions or even chants from the workers raising their demands, the atmosphere was saturated with party music on the speakers, carnival groups hired by the trade unions, and meandering, conservative speeches by trade-union operatives.

Reporters for the World Socialist Web Site spoke to workers at the May Day march. As a bureaucrat with the teacher's union APSE yelled, “We gave the vote to this government to be heard,” the WSWs interviewed Carol, a cook at a school in Golfito, and her co-workers, who indicated that they didn't support the incoming government at all.

“There are very difficult struggles ahead for workers,” Carol said, “and for that we need an indefinite strike.” She added, however, that she was not sure whether the trade union would support such a strike. When asked about the series of strikes in the United States organized by teachers and school workers independently of the trade unions, Carol said she had heard of them, expressed solidarity, and supported the idea of organizing internationally and independently, especially through social media.

As the conversation ended, the representative of APSE, which is known to be the most “combative” of the public-sector trade-unions, declared, “There are no divisions here, we need national unity,” echoing the calls of the PAC administration. Given the clear collusion with the ruling class, the march was one of the smallest in recent years, while on Facebook, teachers complained on the APSE page that “the unions are playing with us,” and that one-day strikes “don’t even tickle the government.”

Union officials have sought to generate illusions in the incoming government. While the state-refinery (Recope) workers interviewed by the WSWS noted indignantly that “our contract was negotiated downwards by Carlos Alvarado himself,” they also expressed illusions in the fact that the union’s ties to the government might be advantageous for them.

In 2016, the trade union Sitrapequia struck a deal with the Labor Ministry to cut about \$9 million of labor benefits yearly. However, one worker argued that “having a seat on the table in the next administration will be beneficial for the struggle against the next government.”

Similarly, Luis, a former worker with the fertilizer producer Fertica represented by the electric and telecommunications trade union SITET, commented, “the trade union has helped us, and I don’t think the bond with the government will make harm, but what matters is that workers need to unite.” After explaining how workers in Panama and Colombia had undergone similar struggles to those faced by Fertica workers and indicating that a “major struggle” is needed, he concluded: “The struggle has to be international.”

The struggle against Fertica, which has since been privatized, actually demonstrates how such corporatist ties between the trade unions and the government are aimed against the workers. The public company responded to a 1995 strike by 300 workers at the plant in Puntarenas, who were protesting non-compliance of the existing contract, by firing all of them without any severance pay.

While the Ministry of Labor and the courts turned their backs, the trade union never worked to mobilize the working class nationally or internationally and instead demoralized workers—more than 50 have already passed away— with endless appeals to improve its ties with the state and the new employers, even using enormous resources to get useless rulings from imperialist agencies like the UN International Labor Organization and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

The trade unions have been working closely with the government to demobilize opposition to the diktats of the credit agencies. Since the beginning of the current Guillermo Solís administration in 2014, according to the “Protestas”

database of the University of Costa Rica covering all collective actions, daily strikes and work stoppages have fallen precipitously each year.

While public teachers went on strike for almost four weeks in 2014, the government has continued its reactionary agenda and the unions have fought to ensure there is little resistance. In January 2017, the trade unions threatened an indefinite national strike across all sectors against a Public Employment bill still being planned to cut yearly pay increases and all other benefits across the board. Edwin Solano, national secretary of the National Medical Union, declared then: “We have negotiated until exhaustion to avoid a social clash; but we are being forced to do this.”

Eventually, the trade unions simply dropped all mention of a strike, and they are now aligning themselves with a government comprised of the old oligarchic parties, the PAC and Frente Amplio, who are all seeking to include essentially the same reactionary public-employment provisions as those initially proposed in the Public Employment bill through the new “tax combo” legislation.

After all, the new labor code adds protections for union leaders from being fired, while it makes their job easier by empowering the courts to turn down appeals by rank-and-file workers.

The public sector workers have been at the forefront of the opposition within the working class to the past four decades of counterrevolutionary governments. Throughout this period, these workers have pushed back against attacks on the public services upon which the population relies for access to healthcare, public education and infrastructure.

In spite of the fact that trade unions have been pressured into convoking symbolic strikes and forcing the government to renounce attempts to directly privatize public services and cuts to nominal wages and labor benefits, the ruling class—conspiring with the trade unions—has merely adopted different tactics to impose essentially the same policies demanded by foreign and national capital.

These have centered around public-private partnerships and opening up the health care, education, and utilities markets in an arrangement through which the state bears the costs but private schools, clinics, infrastructure and telecommunications companies rake in tremendous profits.



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