

Road barricades bring Nicaragua to a halt as Washington sends special envoy

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The Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) government in Nicaragua has renewed its murderous crackdown against demonstrators, as protests calling for an end to the repression and the resignation of President Daniel Ortega and his ruling clique continue to grow.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reported last week that at least 127 have been killed in the repression. This toll has risen as the National Police and pro-government armed groups continue to shoot demonstrators and lay siege to entire towns and sectors of the capital, Managua.

As the social explosion takes on unforeseen dimensions, and with the economy virtually grinding to a halt, Washington has sent a special envoy to push for a faster political settlement. This marks a new stage in the US intervention in the Nicaraguan political crisis, which began April 18 when protests against pension cuts and increases in social security contributions dictated by the IMF were immediately and violently suppressed.

After the massacre of up to 15 demonstrators at a May 30 Mother's Day demonstration joined by hundreds of thousands, the protests have continued across the country, but have increasingly taken the form of street barricades erected and manned by students, workers and peasants to prevent government forces from entering their towns and neighborhoods.

As the repression escalated over the weekend, the barricades multiplied. According to Alliance leaders, they reached a peak this Sunday with 125 blockades affecting 70 percent of the country's thoroughfares and stopping the movement of 6,000 trailer trucks.

On Monday, the Associations of Freight Carriers of Nicaragua ordered the suspension of all services in and out of the country due to the roadblocks and the danger faced by truckers from the repression. On Friday, the Wall Street credit agency Standard & Poor's changed its assessment of the economy from stable to negative, reporting drops in consumption and investment due to the political "impasse."

The demonstrations are also having a regional impact, underscoring the importance of the geographic position and power of the Nicaraguan working class. The largest employer organizations in Costa Rica have reported that the street barricades are affecting 44 percent of Costa Rica's industrial exports, which are sent overland through Nicaragua.

A public education worker in Jinotega told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the Sandinista Youth carried out an assault on roadblocks erected in her town by students, housewives and

workers over the weekend.

"They go with full force to kill and the police protects them. The anti-riot officials are with the *Sandinistas*. There were shootings all through Friday night," she said. There were at least 20 protesters injured and a 12-year-old killed. She was able to identify some of the men shooting at demonstrators from pickup trucks by the Simón Bolívar School as employees of the mayor's office.

Asked about the impact of the protests on workers, she noted, "People work for one or two hours and then they close down". The food is running out, she said, half-jokingly adding, "My mother is going to have to kill all of her chickens now."

The growing mass movement against the government has remained subordinated to the "National Dialogue" between the FSLN, Washington, and the country's top business associations. The student and peasant leaders have led the efforts to prevent the protests from spiraling out of the ruling class's control, while workers and youth are increasingly expressing opposition against all capitalist political parties and state institutions.

Prior to this incident, a CID Gallup poll published on May 29 showed that nearly 70 percent of those surveyed support the demonstrations and the demand for Ortega's resignation. While the support for the FSLN has plummeted to all-time lows, a majority of respondents indicated that they do not back any political party. The president's "favorable" rating shifted from 71 percent in January to 29 percent in May, while similar majorities also have negative perceptions of the COSEP business organization, the army and the police.

Last week, leaders of the April 19 Student Movement, which has remained at the helm of the protests across the main cities of the country, travelled to Washington to meet with US senators, Organization of the American State (OAS) officials, the head of USAID and other top representatives of US imperialism to discuss the crisis and receive new marching orders in support of the "National Dialogue".

On Thursday, the Catholic Church, which is mediating the talks, gave a new and undisclosed proposal to Ortega, who requested 48 hours to "ponder" it. However, he has not given an official response and instead unleashed a renewed offensive by the National Police and pro-government armed groups to clear the roadblocks with rubber bullets and live ammunition.

Then, on Monday, the US Embassy released a statement announcing that a special US envoy took part in the talks between the FSLN government and the opposition, with the approval of the

US Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the State Department.

On June 7, the State Department announced visa restrictions on a handful of unnamed Nicaraguan officials charged with undermining human rights and “democratic values.” Then, Tuesday afternoon, the Nicaraguan news website *Confidencial* reported that it had received a draft of a Senate bill requesting financial sanctions against Nicaraguan officials. Presumably to be announced soon, the bill targets officials deemed by the Trump administration to be responsible for “significant acts of violence or serious human rights violations,” undermining “the democratic process or institutions” and corruption.

These measures are intended to secure US control over the outcome of the discussions, while providing a cover for support for the violent suppression of the protests. As the numbers of demonstrators killed escalated last week, the only specific act condemned by the US government was the burning of the pro-government Radio Nicaragua by protesters on Friday. Meanwhile, the Nica Act, a bill including broad restrictions on Nicaraguan credit access from international institutions, remains shelved in the US Senate.

The US envoy, Caleb McCarry, is a top official for Latin America in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He was the director of the CIA-linked Center for Democracy in Guatemala in the late 1980s, charged with providing a democratic veil for the US-backed military dictatorships and death squads that terrorized and killed hundreds of thousands in the region. He also directed the Center’s mission in Nicaragua prior to the 1990 elections, when it set up an office in Managua to coordinate voting registration by the terrorist Contra forces and to channel foreign support to the opposition led by Violeta Chamorro.

According to anonymous sources present at the meetings this weekend who spoke with *La Prensa*, it was Ortega himself who requested, through the Nicaraguan embassy in the US, that McCarry join the talks. McCarry had met Ortega last year to discuss the Nica Act, after which it was indefinitely shelved. These developments demonstrate that, in spite of the continued pressure, Ortega and the FSLN leadership have gained a measure of support from the dominant and staunchly right-wing sectors in Washington.

The same elements that participated in the bloody US counterrevolutionary operations during the 1980s are now backing Ortega’s repression. Beyond perfunctory condemnations of the state violence by Trump administration officials, the State Department continues to appeal to Ortega to put an end to the protests and arrange a political settlement with the opposition through the “National Dialogue.”

There is little doubt that Ortega, along with the more nakedly pro-imperialist factions of the national bourgeoisie, has guaranteed compliance with US military and economic concerns about Nicaragua’s growing ties with US rivals, chiefly Russia and China.

The representative of the Peasant Anti-Canal Movement in the National Dialogue, Medardo Mairena, communicated to his followers on Monday that Ortega had agreed during the weekend meetings to convoke snap elections, while insisting that he will remain in power until they take place. FSLN leaders told

Confidencial that they are proposing elections sometime in 2019.

All of these talks are being carried out behind the backs of the workers, peasants and youth dying on the streets. It is apparent that a consensus is being reached—in spite of differences over the weeks and months that Ortega will stay in power and promises of impunity for his murderous clique—to rapidly restore political conditions in which the Nicaraguan ruling class and foreign capital can resume their escalation of the exploitation of the working class, including through social austerity measures and further repression.

Beyond the pension cuts that triggered the protests, social anger has been driven by deepening social inequality. A growing concentration of wealth at the top has been accompanied by plummeting levels of social assistance to the poorest sectors and the slashing of benefits for public sector workers. This has accelerated dramatically after Venezuelan aid virtually stopped.

Compared to 2012, when Venezuela donated \$345 million in housing and productive investments and \$209 million in social assistance, the respective figures for 2017 were \$26 million and \$4.7 million. The total Venezuelan aid in 2012 amounted to seven times the total foreign aid expected for Nicaragua this year.

This massive fall in social assistance, along with the further pro-business austerity measures demanded by the IMF, have brought enormous economic pressures on the majority of impoverished households in the country. A 2017 World Bank study found that 39 percent of Nicaraguans live under the “poverty” line of \$4 per day. The bulk of those who have risen above the meager \$4 threshold during the last decade, whether from social assistance or faster economic growth, fell into the “vulnerable” category of \$4 to \$10 per day, comprising 45 percent of Nicaraguans.



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