Strike movement develops in Venezuela as social conditions deteriorate

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21 July 2018

Increasingly frequent strikes and demonstrations among important sectors of the Venezuelan working class have begun to coalesce into demands for a general strike against the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) government of Nicolas Maduro.

Maduro has sought to intimidate workers and lean on the military and National Guard to halt the strikes. On the other hand, the right-wing opposition parties and the largest trade unions, which are controlled by the opposition, are struggling to take the leadership of the growing social discontent. Their aim is to channel it toward a renewed campaign to overthrow the Maduro government and install a US puppet regime.

Social media and press reports on the protests this week note, however, that there is widespread opposition to the trade unions, with workers carrying banners reading "union leaders, traitors of workers."

The Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflicts reported this week that this year has witnessed more than 5,300 demonstrations, chiefly demanding food, water and livable wages. Nine people have been killed in food riots and three others in other protests, some by police and some by armed civilians.

The Academy of Economic Sciences reported this week that inflation during the first semester reached 4,500 percent and that despite minimum salary increases buying power fell about 80 percent in the first six months. The IMF is predicting a 15 percent economic contraction this year.

Since June 25, nurses have been calling for an indefinite strike and have carried out demonstrations daily across the country to protest their miserable salaries, the lack of medicines and equipment and the closing down of units, amid a generalized collapse of the health sector.

On Wednesday, the electrical workers union announced an indefinite strike starting next Monday demanding higher salaries, appealing to other sectors to join them. Earlier this year, electrical and textile workers, public-sector teachers, and university lecturers carried out major strikes.

Researchers, students and administrators of the Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research (IVIC) walked out in protest Wednesday and Thursday demanding higher salaries and more state investment. They were joined by workers from CANTV, a state-owned internet and telephone service provider. Since Wednesday, workers of the state electrical company Carpoelec, teachers, doctors, pensioners, and other workers have also participated in about a dozen demonstrations across the capital, Caracas.

In addition, residents of the working-class communities of El Cementerio, El Paraíso, and San Pablito de Caricuao, all located in the western outskirts of Caracas, placed roadblocks demanding repairs to the water service, which has been cut for four months. The National Guard used tear gas to disperse the protesters, which included elderly and children.

On Friday, the workers at the state-owned super market chain, Abastos Bicentenario, carried out a strike and demonstrated in front of the PSUV-controlled National Constituent Assembly to denounce mass firings that have been occurring for a month, on top of the deplorable working conditions and lost benefits.

The government's response to growing militancy and mass opposition has been to appeal to the military, attack demonstrations, censor online content and criminalize all opposition.

While the minimum salary was increased 103 percent last month for civilian workers, the pay for soldiers increased 2,400 percent.

On national television Thursday, the president of the

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National Constituent Assembly (ANC) and vice-president of the PSUV, Diosdado Cabello, called all youth that oppose the government "criminals."

There is growing concern among the trade union leadership over the strike movement. Iván Freites, leader of the Federation of Oil Workers (FUTPV) and member of the right-wing Popular Will (VP) party led by Leopoldo López—a figure heavily promoted by Washington and the western media as the leader of the opposition—announced Tuesday that he travelled across several states and "became aware of the current situation" among workers.

Signs of fervent opposition have been growing, he noted, with anger overflowing after four workers were blamed for an oil spill and imprisoned earlier this month.

"We convoke all sectors, business people, workers and trade unions to join this call for a strike. We need to consider this general protest as an exit to the crisis and the restitution of the institutional order in Venezuela," he declared. The Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV)—the country's largest trade union organization and an affiliate of the US AFL-CIO—issued similar concerns.

Coming from key figures within the bourgeois opposition, this constituted an appeal to the divided array of right-wing parties and trade-union factions to channel discontent from below into efforts to overthrow the Maduro government.

After a meeting the previous day between the leaders of the opposition parties who have recently constituted themselves as the "broad front"—including Democratic Action, Popular Will, Justice First, and other opposition parties—a spokesperson for the broad front, Víctor Márquez, announced in a press conference Friday that the opposition is discussing a "big national protest."

Comparing the situation today with one year ago, when the MUD convoked a largely unsuccessful "national strike" amid demonstrations instigated by right-wing provocateurs that led to over 150 deaths, Márquez noted "we aspire for a much broader articulation since the protests are much more generalized now."

The hostility and fear inspired by the growing demands from workers to address their desperate social needs explains the nervous "consultations" among the opposition and the trade-union leaders.

The fight to head-off social opposition comes amid US sanctions against the credit and foreign currency life lines of the country, including its sale of bonds and oil through the state-owned PDVSA. American imperialism has sought to use sanctions to deepen the suffering of the Venezuelan people, to further the political crisis of the government and encourage factions of the military and state bureaucracy to rebel against Maduro. Despite disagreement by his cabinet members and advisers, President Donald Trump has reportedly insisted to US and regional officials about the option of a US-led military intervention to depose Maduro.

The think-tank Stratfor, close to the Pentagon and US intelligence apparatus, wrote in May that Washington could seek to "destabilize the economy and complicate the government's ability to remain in power," hoping for either "mass, violent protests by dissatisfied citizens or a military coup attempt by fed-up officers."

Workers are facing the threat of a civil war between two counterrevolutionary and repressive factions of the ruling class and the possibility of a US military intervention.

The ongoing upsurge of the class struggle in Venezuela needs to be urgently connected to the increasingly militant struggles by workers internationally and organized independently of all opposing sections of the ruling class and their respective factions in the trade-union bureaucracy and the armed forces, as part of a political struggle to destroy capitalism and for world socialist revolution.

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