After three months of demonstrations end, Nicaraguan workers face further repression and imperialist threats

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Last week, the armed forces controlled by the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) government of Daniel Ortega swept through the main pockets of blockades and resistance, including the Autonomous National University and the city of Masaya—historically a bastion of support for the FSLN. The government deployed hundreds of armed squads of police and paramilitary squads to violently clear entire towns, many guarded with road blockades made up of cement blocks.

According to the special investigative committee set up by the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR), at least 11 protesters died between Monday and Wednesday, bringing the total of people killed to 277 and more than 2,000 injured in continuous demonstrations since April 18. The IACHR also reports dozens of kidnappings of demonstrators during the last two weeks.

Peasants who had travelled to Managua, León, Masaya and other cities to man the blockades have mostly left. Leaders of the Anti-Canal Peasant Movement, which composed the Civic Alliance dominated by the business chambers and US-financed opposition groups, are openly discussing an armed struggle against the government, raising the prospect of a new civil war three decades after the war between the FSLN government and the US-backed Contra guerrillas.

The demonstrations triggered an economic downturn, shifting projected growth for 2018 from 4.9 percent, one of the highest in the region, to 1 percent, according to the Nicaraguan Central Bank. Other economists expect an economic contraction. At least 60,000 jobs were lost, including about 20,000 workers whose continued employment funds the social security institute INSS. In fact, it was an IMF-dictated decree cutting pensions and increasing the rate of INSS contributions from workers and employers that first sparked the demonstrations in mid-April, forcing Ortega to suspend the measures.

Now, workers are facing even deeper austerity measures given the worsening of the crisis of the state-controlled social security fund, which covers over 800,000 workers. At the same time, in order to attract lost foreign investments, the only policy available for the ruling class is deepening the attacks on the living standards of what is already the second poorest country in the Americas.

After suppressing the recent upsurge of demonstrations, Ortega's approval rating fell from over 70 percent in January to 19 percent in June, according to the most recent CID/Gallup poll. Seventy-two percent of responders call for his resignation.

On Monday, the Sandinista-controlled Parliament approved a law punishing with 15 to 20 years of prison all "terrorism," defined as anyone who kills or injures others outside of an armed conflict, destroys property, changes the constitutional order or "forces the government or an international organization to realize an act or abstain from it."

This legislation criminalizes all forms of social protest against the government, foreign companies and imperialist credit agencies like the IMF who dictate austerity measures. After crushing the demonstrations, the FSLN is institutionalizing police-state measures to prepare for major class battles still ahead.

On July 19, marking the 39th anniversary of the 1979 Sandinista revolution, hundreds of thousands of FSLN

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supporters gathered in Managua and marched in other parts of the country. Ortega used the occasion as an opportunity to celebrate his “victory” against the anti-IMF protests and to make further threats against demonstrators and those priests who have backed the protests.

“They need to get exorcised… those devils, demons”, he denounced, threatening to continue the “defense” of his government and even pledging to “eradicate hate messages online.”

The erosion of Ortega’s economic support from Venezuelan investments and his loss of popular support have turned him increasingly into a liability for the ruling class, which has been reflected in calls for early elections by the main business organizations of the country previously in close alliance with his government, including the Superior Council for Private Enterprise (COSEP) and the American Chamber of Commerce.

The Trump administration and the Organization of American States (OAS), which operates as a US foreign policy arm for the Western Hemisphere, were giving effective support for Ortega’s efforts to quell the demonstrations while at the same time using student and peasant leaders to contain and channel the demonstrations behind a “national dialogue” mediated by the Catholic Church.

Ortega told the crowd of supporters and state functionaries Thursday that when discussing the removal of police from the streets in late-April, “the US ambassador told us: ‘the police have to act now.’” After a small pause, he added, “It’s not because the ambassador told us to do it, but because the State is responsible.”

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