

After 89 days, trade unions sell out historic strike in Costa Rica

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The strike that began on September 10 against a new regressive fiscal plan rammed through by the National Coalition government of President Carlos Alvarado ended this weekend after 89 days.

While initially incorporating the entire public sector of Costa Rica and entailing mass marches with broader sectors of workers and youth throughout September—with dozens arrested and the killing by police officers of Antuán Serrano, 17—the strike was continued virtually only by teachers after October.

It was the longest strike in Costa Rican history and marks a new stage in the growth of social opposition and the class struggle. At the same time, it demonstrates that the treachery of the trade unions, which betrayed the strike with the complicity of their pseudo-left backers, leaving workers to fend for themselves against reprisals from administrators, knows no bounds.

According to figures published by the Ministry of Education, the participation of teachers started with 93 percent, fell to 70 percent in early October and ended with 51.8 percent, which kept most schools closed.

A labor court declared the teachers' strike illegal on October 9 claiming "it cannot be considered a peaceful movement" because protestors blocked roads. Similar rulings against workers in other public institutions were used by ministries, municipalities and the trade unions to intimidate most workers back to work with threats of mass firings. By October 12, the government indicated that 98.5 percent of workers in strike were educators.

"We never received any declaration of illegality but were still threatened with being fired. Workers got scared," Francisco, a municipal worker in San José told the WWS. "Then the ANEP [trade union] ended the strike. They imposed that on us. We didn't do it or vote. Now, ANEP is telling us that if we collect 500,000 signatures against the fiscal plan, we can bring it down."

Under immense pressure from teachers, the three major

trade unions in the education sector—SEC, ANDE, and APSE—submitted objections to the ruling, and an appeals court annulled the declaration of illegality on November 19, stating that no evidence was presented to substantiate that the protests were not peaceful, sending the case back to the labor tribunals.

As late as November 29, after the SEC ended the strike, 97 percent of APSE members and an overwhelming majority of ANDE members voted for continuing the strike. However, the trade unions were then openly discussing efforts to "compromise our will" with the government and "to provide a proper end to the school year."

A week later, on December 3, the Congress approved the new fiscal plan after undergoing several reviews by the top courts. That day, the trade unions sent out a declaration indicating that "a battle has been lost." The following day, they held backdoor discussions with the government.

The strike terrified the ruling class, leading it to accelerate its build-up of police forces and to intensify threats and pressure on trade unions to work more aggressively to suppress the class struggle.

On December 5, amid an escalation of defamatory attacks by the media and government officials against teachers, ANDE and APSE put the strike to a vote without any previous discussions or assemblies as a last ditch attempt to end the strike before the vacations and a few days before the final ruling by the labor courts.

Teachers on social media denounced pressure by union bureaucrats, who were telling them that there was nothing left to fight for and that a break was required to "recharge our strength." APSE even included in the ballot the contradictory option of rejecting any agreement with the government while halting the strike, which received 58 percent of the votes. More than a third voted to continue the strike.

In this way, the arduous 89-day strike was ended.

The furious response by teachers was immediate, particularly among APSE members. Hundreds of teachers flooded social media platforms to denounce the isolation and deceit used by the trade unions to end the strike, with several calling for teachers to abandon the three bureaucracies.

“‘Walking out together and returning together’ has lost its meaning,” commented Diego on the APSE Facebook page. “Yesterday you had said that we would decide things democratically, but there was no assembly. Why rush? What were the motives to stop moments before a final ruling by the courts?”

Alejandro, another teacher wrote: “It leaves a lot to think about and a heartache. We are now being criticized like never before... The same union contradicts itself completely in its arguments. One day it says it’s dangerous to go back and the next day that we should return. Things don’t work like that. We should have at least waited until a final ruling. To go back was to betray us.”

The new fiscal plan constitutes an initial attack to open the floodgates to further social cuts and regressive taxes. It includes new regressive added-value taxes, new brackets minimally increasing taxes for the highest incomes and widespread cuts for public employees. The most reviled measure is a new 1 percent tax on staple foods.

However, the law also enshrines further cuts to spending proportionate to the size of the public debt. While the measures specified by the new law amount to 1.2 percent of GDP yearly, the Central Bank estimates that the total “savings” from future cuts that the bill demands will add up to 3.7 percent of GDP by 2022.

The yearly public deficit is equivalent to 7 percent of GDP and most of it is composed of interest payments to financial vultures—a disbursement that has doubled since 2012 and continues to increase exponentially as interest rates increase internationally and the currencies in emerging markets like the colon are being devalued against the dollar.

Followed by a 5.7 percent of GDP in Brazil, Costa Rica has the second highest proportion in Latin America and the Caribbean of its yearly economic production going to interest payments on government debt, reaching 3.97 percent of GDP in 2018. This wealth is being directly looted from the working class and transferred to the accounts of foreign and local financiers.

Earlier this month, Moody’s predicted that, even with

the new fiscal plan, public debt will continue to grow rapidly. The Wall Street credit rating agency makes clear that investors expect deeper social cuts that “will be difficult facing popular opposition and a context of growth deceleration.”

The strike in Costa Rica, the widespread popular support for it and, more fundamentally, the resurgence of class struggle across the world foreshadow even more explosive struggles in the coming period.

A University of Costa Rica poll published November 21 found that, for the first time in five years, the main social grievances are the high cost of living and fears about the economy, with 83.3 percent of interviewees viewing the economic situation of the country negatively.

Many teachers referred online to the “yellow vest” protests in France, “where the people have risen.” This is because the demands and grievances of French workers are shared in Costa Rica and globally.

The 2018 strike in Costa Rica is an integral part of an incipient resurgence of working class struggle internationally against social inequality, austerity, attacks against democratic rights and militarism, whose logic will push workers toward general strikes across entire sectors and continents and present a direct challenge to capitalist rule.

The essential lesson of the 89-day strike for teachers and all workers in Costa Rica is that the only way to unite their struggles across Costa Rica and internationally is to organize independently from the unions, which function as agents of the bourgeoisie.

Only a Marxist leadership in the working class armed with the international, socialist and revolutionary program fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International can guarantee the political independence of this growing resistance among workers and youth against capitalism and lead it into a progressive direction.



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