

Honduran government cracks down on strike by teachers, doctors and nurses

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Educators in Honduras have been on a general strike since Thursday, and university students, doctors and nurses have carried out demonstrations and partial strikes since May 20 against the government of Juan Orlando Hernández (JOH) of the National Party (PNH).

All regions of the country have seen roadblocks, marches, and university occupations, including a march of tens of thousands of people Monday and Tuesday in the country's capital, Tegucigalpa. Virtually all have been met with violent repression by the Honduran police and military.

This follows an initial week of strikes that began on April 26 against two proposed reforms aimed at privatizing health care, pensions and education. The reforms are dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and involve expedited budget cuts and mass layoffs.

On Monday night, a large contingent of demonstrators protested in front of the US embassy in Tegucigalpa in an acknowledgement that the social attacks imposed by the Honduran ruling class originate in Wall Street boardrooms and in Washington DC.

Amid a growing resurgence of the class struggle, including among tens of thousands of US teachers fighting in defense of public education, the Honduran trade unions and the opposition parties have done everything possible to keep workers from appealing to their class brothers and sisters across the region and particularly the United States for a common political struggle against social austerity, militarization and corporate attacks led by US imperialism.

On May 21, as the protest movement reached new proportions, the Trade Union of Public Education Employees (SIEMPE) and the Honduran Medical Association convoked a "National Assembly of Departmental Platforms for the Defense of Health and Education," as a negotiating table to contain the protests and channel them behind talks with the ruling National Party.

The corporate media, along with the student and pseudo-left organizations, including those that orbit the ostensible opposition party, Libre, have promoted the president of the Medical Association, Dr. Suyapa Figueroa, as the

spokeswoman of the protests, citing her vocal condemnations of the social crisis.

In an interview with CNN last Friday, for instance, Figueroa said "the health care system has not been able to perform surgeries. There have been instances of no water for developing x-rays. No water at operating rooms to wash one's hands." She soon added, however, that the protest movement was "apolitical" and that "this struggle has a lot of people that belong to the ruling party, which is only natural, and they are supporting us."

The government, however, has made clear that it will respond to any challenge to the interests of the Honduran and international financial elites in a totally uncompromising and ruthless fashion.

The corresponding ministers announced yesterday sanctions and firings against teachers, along with criminal charges against medical personnel and the hiring of replacement scabs.

A new criminal code that went into effect May 15 criminalizes demonstrations in the broadest terms with up to four years in prison and 15 years for leaders or promoters. It also establishes a prison term of 3 to 10 years for carrying out abortions.

During the last week, teachers have repeatedly denounced to reporters and in social media the presence of the *Tigres* special forces participating in the repression against demonstrations. National Police officers and the lethal *Tigres* were recorded accompanying a plainclothes agent on Monday unsuccessfully trying to kidnap two teachers seeking refuge at a restaurant in the town of Santa Cruz de Yojoa.

On April 29, a plainclothes police officer shot a teacher protester in Tegucigalpa with live ammunition.

The Honduran special forces deployed against workers and youth were trained by the US Green Berets for "urban combat." In 2015, the US Army described their training: "Many periods of instruction focused on instilling fundamental principles of close quarters battle and knowing how to execute them amidst the chaos that is combat." The

commander of the US 7th Special Forces Group in charge of the training, Col. Christopher Riga, declared during the graduation, “I promise you at some point in time, together, we’ll be on target killing terrorists and drug traffickers together.”

The last decade has been marked by deadly military and police crackdowns against mass antigovernment protests and activists in Honduras to resist the dramatic deterioration of living standards. This escalation of the police-state measures to enforce social attacks has proven to be the purpose of the military coup orchestrated by the Democratic Party administration of Barack Obama in June 2009 to topple president Manuel Zelaya.

Emails released in 2010 by WikiLeaks showed that the State Department under Hillary Clinton backed the coup and used the Organization of American States to undermine opposition by other governments. It is the preparation of new imperialist crimes, including the continued backing of the murderous regime in Tegucigalpa, that is fueling the ongoing persecution by Washington of WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange, and the jailing of the former army specialist who leaked those diplomatic cables, Chelsea Manning.

The Honduran congress approved the education and health care bills after a month of negotiations between the regime and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which finally agreed to a two-year deal involving a credit line and policies to “improve the framework of macroeconomic policies, elevate the *quality* of public spending and strengthen the rule of law.”

The immediate step announced by the chief IMF negotiator, Esteban Vesperoni, was a \$311 million loan to the Honduran government, partially to “rescue” the state-owned National Electric Company (ENEE). Ironically this money will facilitate the “implementation of the structural electric sector law,” which privatized the distribution of electricity in 2014. Vesperoni also ordered “revising the contract with the [private] Empresa Energía Honduras (EEH) to incorporate the necessary incentives.”

In 2016, in the words of EEH general manager German García, “the whole distribution network of the country was given in a trust to Ficohsa [Honduran Commercial Finance Bank] and we won the bid.”

The example of ENEE spells the fate for the still unannounced measures regarding health care and education. The latest loan adds to hundreds of millions more flushed by the IMF in this period through the bankrupt ENEE, the privatization of which has channeled vast wealth to the Honduran and international financial elite—handing out slices to Wall Street creditors through the IMF. Other beneficiaries include Ficohsa owner and Honduran billionaire Camilo Atala as well as Colombian magnate William Vélez, the

majority owner of EEH through his Grupo ETHUSS. One of the other uses for these funds has also been expanding the Honduran military, which became a top debtor of ENEE.

In the final analysis, the working class has paid the cost through more than 2,000 layoffs and other concessions at ENEE as well as constant hikes of the electricity rates.

Thousands more have been fired under the Hernández administration in the Aqueduct and Sewer Authority (SANAA), Honduran telecommunications Hondutel, the National Port Company, the state tax agency (DEI) and other public agencies as part of the escalated drive of privatizations and social cuts dictated by the IMF.

The government has denied that the education and health care bills will result in mass layoffs, but it has openly stated their goal: “saving” \$300 million, the bulk of which will go to servicing the public debt to financial vultures and building up the repressive apparatus. The wreckage of the health care system, including the outward stealing of hundreds of millions of dollars by the PNH regime under Porfirio Lobo, has led to thousands of unnecessary deaths while feeding the business of private clinics.

While expanding the ranks of the super-rich in Honduras, the effects for most of the population have been calamitous, with the poverty rate increasing more than 10 percent since the 2009 coup to roughly 70 percent of the population. Economists at the National Autonomous University (UNAH) predicted that 110,000 more people will fall below the official poverty line this year.

Despite the brutal repression by the Honduran state, the struggles against these intolerable conditions, which in turn fuel thousands of yearly killings from gang warfare, will only grow larger and more militant.

Hundreds of thousands of educators, doctors, students, other workers and peasants from Honduras and the region continue to seek safer and better conditions for themselves and their families by migrating north in the face of the anti-immigrant policies by both Democratic and Republican administrations that have culminated in the militarization of the border, squalid detention camps, family separation and the gradual destruction of asylum rights by the Trump White House.

The number of apprehensions at the US-Mexico border, mostly of migrants from northern Central America, topped 100,000 per month in March and April, nearly doubling the record highs in 2014.



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