

“What we want is to be able to make a call internationally”

## Costa Rican teachers speak out against antistrike laws

Our reporters  
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“My opinion is that we should organize ourselves. It’s a good idea to go home by home, here is the plan, here is what we have. What do we do? Let’s organize. Going neighborhood by neighborhood. What we want is to be able to make a call internationally. In Costa Rica, what we are missing is information, forming groups, organizations in the community, neighborhood, whatever is necessary to be able to react and to demonstrate that the government is not in charge. The people are.”

This is how Manuel, a striking assistant staff member at a public school in the city of Heredia, described on Thursday to the *World Socialist Web Site* what he sees as the necessary steps to resist the onslaught against democratic rights and living standards waged by the “National Unity Government” of Costa Rica’s President Carlos Alvarado.

This administration, which incorporates Alvarado’s Citizens Action Party (PAC), the pseudo-left Broad Front, and the traditional oligarchic parties, the National Liberation Party (PLN) and the Social Christians (PUSC), is proving to be one of the most right-wing governments in Costa Rican history.

Between September and December of last year, teachers, doctors, utility workers, trash collectors, municipality workers and other government employees carried out a 93-day strike against a “fiscal plan” involving a set of regressive taxes and widespread cuts to bonuses and other benefits for public-sector workers, as part of an austerity agenda demanded by international finance capital.

This was the longest strike in Costa Rican history and, at its peak in September, it mobilized support from hundreds of thousands of workers in the private sector, students and other layers of the population. As roadblocks were being set up in the poorest regions on the Caribbean side of the country, the government ordered police to fire on protesters, killing 17-year-old Antuán Serrano.

The Alvarado administration rammed through these measures despite the overwhelming opposition on the streets

and in the polls, relying on the trade unions to keep workers from appealing to teachers and other workers across the United States, Mexico, Argentina and internationally, who were carrying out mass strikes and protests against austerity at the time.

The trade unions isolated and ultimately betrayed the strike, which emboldened the government to escalate its offensive in the form of the “Law to Bring Legal Security over Strikes and its Procedures,” which imposes a blanket ban on economic and political strikes except for contract disputes, while prohibiting roadblocks and picket lines and accelerating the ruling of strikes as illegal. Another bill being discussed by legislators would prohibit strikes in the education sector by naming it an essential service.

The education-sector union APSE was one of the last unions to call off the strike last year and it is the only one that has called any action against the most recent regressive legislation. Far from reflecting an actual will to resist these attacks, however, the union bureaucracy seeks to contain and quell the brave militancy among teachers through “intermittent” strikes.

Its “battle plan” is meant to let off steam little by little until workers are confused and demoralized. One-day strikes will occur each Tuesday during June. According to APSE’s announcement, if this doesn’t lead to the annulment of the two antistrike bills—and it will not—a one-week strike will follow the midyear vacations, but these actions will stop if the courts rule them illegal.

On Thursday, the WSWs spoke to a group of strikers from Pavas, San José, which included several teachers and the president of the local APSE branch. The union official claimed, “In spite of the approval [of the fiscal plan], we won.” When asked what he meant, he launched a diatribe pitting workers against each other: “Here, we are double-faced. We say, ‘OK, let’s strike, but let others do it.’ In the private sector and when things really come down to it, people still don’t get educated, they don’t read, don’t get

informed. There is no total support from the people. They do nothing.”

Contradicting this outlook, a teacher from Puntarenas explained that it was indeed a defeat. “The media is bought, and the politicians have all turned against us,” he said. “So, we have actually gone out to the streets, to homes, to inform. People are fearful. Everything is a threat, a threat, and another threat.” He explained that “the new bill wants to silence us, prohibiting strikes in a law that takes effect on June 19.”

One of the teachers from Pavas responded to the official, “Because of these threats against us, many of those here on the streets get frightened. They threaten to take our salaries away, to tax staple foods. Many just say, ‘Well, I’ll have to stay working to eat.’”

Another teacher from Pavas added: “On Tuesday, the supervisor for the school district arrived to browbeat those going on strike. ‘Be careful, don’t go on strike. Look at the Cubans coming to Costa Rica to take your posts. They are discussing a bill on [placing sanctions on] ‘hate speech’; that is what they are doing against these Cubans.’”

Several of the workers interviewed commented on the international character of these attacks; however, none of them were aware of the strikes of teachers occurring the same day in Honduras and Chile and recently in the United States, Argentina, Brazil or other countries.

The Pavas teacher explained: “Those in power and the countries who have power are uniting around these neoliberal policies that are not helping the people but are instead impoverishing them.” Manuel from Heredia said something similar: “It’s as if all governments agreed to gravely limit the rights of workers, despite the low salaries that we already have.”

The WSWS asked the APSE official why, since the union voted to strike on May 11, no effort had been made to inform teachers about struggles internationally and much less to unite them. The APSE official responded: “Not everyone in APSE has the same ideals. When we go to meetings with presidents, like last year when the indefinite strike was voted, many were not in agreement. In the movement itself, we are not all committed with the cause.”

Would the union ever advance an international struggle? “I have no response to that,” he answered.

One of the teachers from Pavas present expressed support for the idea of organizing rank-and-file committees independently of the unions. “That is necessary, and I believe that it can be achieved through social media because they are dominated by the people. And, that would be a good measure because it’s what all Costa Ricans use. Yes, it can be done.”

The WSWS asked whether teachers knew who Julian

Assange, the WikiLeaks founder, was, but none did. After explaining that he is currently jailed in London and waiting to be extradited to the US to face charges for publishing countless documents exposing war crimes by the US and its allies, regime-change operations and diplomatic conspiracies, they all expressed support for his defense.

The same teacher from Pavas noted, “Of course, and you need an international struggle for that. He was so brave to denounce such things! What does that mean? The power of those groups at the top that want to hide such things has now also affected the freedom of expression of the people. They control all the companies that manage speech; we have to unite workers in the same way to defend him.”

Erica, another teacher from Puntarenas, also said that the strike last year “failed,” but pointed to what she believes is the way forward: “We have to follow what the Yellow Vests did in France. The people see the need [to fight] because they are the ones affected, not just the public sector or private sector. We all have the same basic needs. It was the people itself that organized.”

When the WSWS pointed to the central role of social media in organizing the protests in France, Erica commented: “Imagine if we organized like that. It would be a whole different story, because everything would get paralyzed. Some complain about fixing streets, gas prices and what not, but if we all got united, it would be a different struggle, because we’re divided. If we unite, we wouldn’t need unions. However, that is not possible if we can’t express ourselves, because that is moving back in term of democracy, in what we have acquired. Costa Rica can be the country that has no army and all that, but without the right to strike, to demonstrate, that is unbelievable. I’ll give this my everything.”

She concluded: “We have to defend our rights and generalize them for everyone. That all of these groups don’t get prioritized and get so many luxuries for the few—something more equal.”



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