Venezuelan military court jails union official as working-class opposition grows

Andrea Lobo
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A military tribunal has sentenced one of Venezuela's most well-known trade union officials, Rubén González, 60, to five years and nine months in prison.

González, who leads the union at the state-owned CVG Ferrominera Orinoco, the only copper supplier in the country, was detained along with fourteen other union officials on November 30, 2018, after participating in a march in the capital Caracas demanding wage increases to compensate for hyperinflation. The arrests and sentence are based on "Constitutional State of Exception" decrees imposed by the government of Nicolás Maduro. These decrees, imposed in May 2016 and renewed in September 2018, allow the government to use martial law to "preserve domestic order".

The Maduro government is sending a signal that it will suppress all social opposition from below against the intolerable crisis that has forced more than four million Venezuelans to flee in recent years, according to a July report by the UN.

González has ties to the right-wing opposition in the country and the US-financed Venezuelan Workers Confederation (CTV). In February 2011, he was sentenced by a civilian court to seven years and six months after leading a 16-day strike protesting the violation of existing contracts. Widespread outrage and protests led to his release four days later.

The new indictment in a military court constitutes an unequivocal attempt at criminalizing growing opposition among workers and the impoverished masses.

On August 8, for instance, a major march by the Peasant Struggle Platform, reportedly joined by Caracas workers, demanding support for small and midsize farmers and denouncing hundreds of recent killings of activists chiefly by big landowners, bravely confronted repression by the National Guard.

During the event, which was ignored by corporate Western media, protesters shouted, "against capitalism and its hit squads" and "with repression there is no revolution."

In early April, amid major power outages that Maduro attributed to US cyberattacks, Venezuelan soldiers and police cracked down on desperate demonstrations across working-class neighborhoods. This has been the default response of the government to increasingly frequent roadblocks and marches.

The Venezuelan Social Conflict Observatory (OVCS) recorded 10,477 protests in the first half of 2019, nearly double the number during the same period in 2018, which saw 61 protesters killed. Out of the total, 6,453 of these protests were based on demands regarding basic services, housing, food, medicines and labor rights, while the rest were related to "political participation."

Production and consumption of basic staples has been set back decades, with the production of corn and rice falling to the level in 1970 and sugar cane to 1960, while beef and poultry consumption fell over 70 percent in the last year, according to a July report by the Confederation of Agricultural Associations.

Most essentially, the repressive measures demonstrate the class character of the United Socialist Venezuelan Party (PSUV) government under Nicolás Maduro as well as that of the movements associated with the so-called "Latin American left turn", all of which have turned sharply to the right. Like every other bourgeois government, the PSUV regime employs the armed forces and courts of the capitalist state to protect the property interests and rule of the capitalist class over the working class that produces all the social wealth.

Under siege by US imperialism, Maduro sees the greater enemy in the striving of workers to satisfy their basic human needs. At the same time, the sectors of the national bourgeoisie and military brass represented by the "Bolivarian" regime are increasingly eager to end US sanctions to resume their business ties with the American

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financial oligarchy.

Exactly two years ago, Washington imposed debilitating economic sanctions against Venezuelan oil exports, the major source of foreign currency used for vital imports like food and medicines. These sanctions are directly responsible for thousands of premature deaths in Venezuela. Meanwhile, the Maduro government has been holding talks behind the backs of ordinary Venezuelans with US imperialism through the CIA coup plotters led by Juan Guaidó aimed not at solving the social crisis, but at striking a compromise to guarantee the privileges of Maduro's clique while handing power to an even more ruthless regime controlled directly from the State Department and Pentagon.

On August 6, the Trump administration rolled out sanctions prohibiting all business by US entities with the Venezuelan government, while dictating to representatives of 59 governments meeting that day in Perú that they comply. "I want to be clear that this sweeping executive order authorizes the US government to identify, target and impose sanctions on any persons who continue to provide support to the illegitimate regime of Nicolas Maduro," the US national security advisor, John Bolton, declared in Perú.

In an interview on the sidelines of the summit, the US special envoy on Venezuela, Elliott Abrams, ominously recalled the US invasion of Panama in 1989-1990 to overthrow the government of Manuel Noriega that followed a similar economic blockade.

The following day, Maduro suspended talks with the US-led coup representatives in Barbados. The adjunct vice-president of the National Assembly and opposition leader in the negotiations, Stalin González, lamented that "we had already entered deep waters, with a proposal on the table, so now they stop." Guaidó, however, reported Tuesday that Norwegian mediators continue to meet with Maduro's representatives, suggesting that negotiations continue indirectly.

Sitting on top of the world's largest proven oil reserves, Venezuela is an important arena in Washington's drive to both deprive China of energy resources and roll back Chinese and Russian influence from US imperialism's "own backyard." In the process, American oil corporations hope to regain full control over the Orinoco Basin's oil deposits.

Despite the Chavistas' best efforts to service their debts with Wall Street and the Russian and Chinese governments, prioritizing these payments over social services and infrastructure development, Caracas still has about $150 billion in defaulted debt. The economy has shrunk by two-thirds in the last five years, and the government's foreign currency reserves have virtually run out. Venezuela's crisis and the predatory demands of foreign capital are both being exacerbated by the global economic downturn and financial instability.

On Thursday, the Venezuelan and Russian defense ministers met in Moscow and signed a reciprocal agreement providing for visits by warships to each other's ports as well military-technical cooperation.

Minister Sergei Shoigu, as reported by *Newsweek*, said that Russia would back Maduro in "pursuing an independent foreign policy and counteracting U.S. attempts to change the legitimately-elected government." In February, Russian and Venezuelan warplanes carried out joint drills on the Caribbean.

China, Turkey and Iran also continue to back the Venezuelan government. *Forbes* columnist Milton Ezrati wrote in May that China's stake includes $25 billion in outstanding loans pegged to Venezuelan oil, as well as a geopolitical door "into areas where the United States, China's great rival, had what many considered unchallenged hegemony." "If Juan Guaido secures power," Ezrati adds mildly, "China will have to take a haircut on what remains outstanding."

Any threat from the working class will be met by a crackdown from either of the rival capitalist elites.

Against the backdrop of the resurgence of the working class internationally, Venezuela's increasingly combative working class in a country with nearly 30 million urban dwellers, more than 90 percent of the population, is seen as a major threat by the ruling elites in Washington, Beijing, Moscow, London and Caracas alike.

A successful struggle against imperialism can develop only out of the revolutionary mobilization of the working class independently of all nationalist and pro-capitalist parties and organizations, including the trade unions and their pseudo-left apologists. Above all, workers in Venezuela must draw upon support from hundreds of millions of workers entering the class struggle across the Americas and worldwide.

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