

Costa Rican government imposes ban on political strikes

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Thousands of public sector workers, including teachers, doctors, nurses, electricians, trash collectors and others carried out a national strike in Costa Rica on Tuesday to oppose an anti-strike law promoted by the right-wing administration of President Carlos Alvarado and his Citizen's Action Party (PAC).

As thousands of workers marched outside, the Legislative Assembly voted in favor of the bill, banning all forms of political strikes and imposing draconian limits on all strikes. It constitutes a historic attack against a basic democratic right enshrined in the 1948 Constitution and can only be enforced through police state repression.

The law's prohibitions cover "all strikes with political ends or of any nature without a direct connection with the employment relationship or labor violations chargeable to employers." At the same time, it places a 48-hour limit on strikes against policies "that directly affect the economic and social interests of workers," while prohibiting more than one strike against the same policy.

The law annuls the existing provision that strikers should receive payment for missed days until the strike is declared illegal. It also expands the bans on strikes in the Labor Code regarding "essential services," including 10 categories including health care, air traffic, migration, police, firefighters, and transportation of medicines, medical supplies and perishable foods. These latter products, which constitute fully two-thirds of exports, threaten the outlawing of strikes among the private sector workers involved in their production and harvesting.

Two other categories are created for "transcendental" and "strategic" services. The former includes garbage collection, ports, elections, banks and courts, limiting strikes to 10 days during which "minimum services" must be maintained. "Strategic" services include teachers, limiting their strikes to 21 days and prohibiting school occupations. The legislation also establishes an expedited,

oral process for labor tribunals to declare strikes illegal. Picket lines are fully barred.

Amid slanders against strikers in the corporate media and a nationalist orientation of the unions and pseudo left toward the rotten political establishment, the vast majority of workers have not been politically prepared for this lurch toward authoritarian forms of rule.

The measure follows escalating preparations for dictatorship across the world, with the British Prime Minister suspending Parliament, the US president ruling increasingly by emergency decree, the French president deploying troops against "yellow vest" protests and the German ruling coalition promoting the fascistic right.

Now, any attempt by the working class majority in Costa Rica to use its social power under capitalism—withholding labor—whether it is to defend and advance their democratic rights or to oppose wars, invasions, coups and all forms of aggression and diktats by imperialism and tyranny nationally and internationally, will be deemed illegal by a government dubbed "progressive" and a "firm democracy" in Western media.

The WSWs spoke with striking workers marching in San Jose, Tuesday, most of whom preferred to remain anonymous. A pharmacy worker in the state health care institution, called the "Caja," declared: "Unconstitutionally, they are robbing our right to express ourselves. We have to be conscious that they are taking away the right to demonstrate, at a time when salaries do not suffice, the added-value tax is coming and tons of companies are closing down. They cut our income and raise water and light bills. If the people don't 'pinch' themselves, we'll be 'horses and wagons'—it will be whatever they command.

"This is not only in Costa Rica, but across Latin America and Central America, everyone is protesting because economic pressures are pushing us down, working people are losing their jobs and wealth is only for

those at the top.”

A lab technician added: “It’s noticeable that people have been uniting, facing the situation that the country is in, not only those of us at the Caja or teachers. Simply put, they are shutting us all up.”

A teacher from Heredia with 30 years of experience said: “This is a struggle between the haves and have-nots. In France, there were social struggles and what did French politicians say? They condemned those struggles, which exerted enormous pressures. Politicians don’t want to see that in our country. They want to standardize us to give us all a hunger wage.

“That is something our unions never do—to inform us about what is happening in other countries and to be able to have communication. We need those spaces for workers to share their experiences, successes and defeats, to get empowered. When we meet with the union, we only talk about our immediate surroundings and that’s it.”

Costa Rica, whose economic inequality is the highest in three decades and ranks ninth globally according to the World Bank, witnessed its longest strike between September and December last year, and dozens of “intermittent” strikes since. Hundreds of thousands of students and private sector truckers, fishermen, agricultural workers and others have joined unprecedented marches, school occupations, and roadblocks.

A “fiscal” law involving regressive added-value taxes for staple foods, electricity and water, pinned to massive cuts to annual raises, bonuses and pensions for public-sector workers, triggered these demonstrations. Workers and youth in protests have also voiced broader grievances over growing unemployment, extreme poverty, dilapidated schools, and gas prices. In July, demonstrations forced the minister of education to resign.

Against this mass opposition, the Alvarado regime has rammed through such legislation and other austerity measures to service interest payments to local and international investors—the fastest growing expense of the government—and to cut public services, while helping to accelerate the privatization of health care and education, and to lower living standards.

“After last year’s strike that was so long and grueling and left many drained, the unions are now convoking these intermittent strikes,” explained an elementary school teacher from Santa Ana. “While we still have the right to come here and strike, it’s done to reason with a government that doesn’t want to negotiate ... that is controlled by socio-economic tendencies that want to

enrich the wealthy and impoverish the poor. But we have to keep on fighting and striking.”

Asked if workers, as opposed to the union’s calls to the government, should appeal to the rest of the working class in Costa Rica and internationally, she noted: “That is a good strategy. Many people are tired of the unions and think that unions sell out. Even though we keep trying to fight in one way or another, some always try to profit from that.”

The pharmacy worker also shared this perspective, indicating, “Unions have too many ties; they do their thing. But it’s us, the working people who need to wake up. We have to rise up and protest. The unions are tied up through political doors.”

A large group of high school teachers from Heredia affiliated to the APSE union denounced media and government propaganda for working to block support from workers in the private sector, which constitute 86 percent of employees. “The media is being manipulative, fomenting hatred, dividing us and having everyone fight in social media,” one young teacher said. Responding to their slanders, another said: “Politicians are the ones with privileges. The working class has no privileges; we don’t get free gas, cellphone use and allowances. We pay everything from our salary.” A co-worker said, “We can’t dodge taxes either, and I don’t have luxury pensions. They lie. I don’t get 14 million colones [\$24,400] per month. No teacher does... Money buys the media.”

Another teacher said: “People are not informed that we fight for things that we consider belonging to everyone, and now they prohibit our protests against economic policies ... Sadly, the unions and these struggles always end up in this way and we never reach the people.”

Then a co-worker concluded, “Now, the business chamber will simply say they don’t want to keep paying end-of-year bonuses, and we’ll have no right to strike.”



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