

Hunger increased by quarantines leads to protests across Latin America

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Roadblocks, raids of supermarkets and mass quarantine violations by desperate workers forced to work and find food are spreading across the poorest neighborhoods of Latin America, where the official response to the coronavirus outbreak has focused on police state measures and pushed the region to the brink of open dictatorship.

As the coronavirus pandemic spreads to every corner of the world, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization warned of potential world food shortages from supply chain disruptions caused by decline of seasonal migrants, trade barriers, sanctions and currency fluctuations.

After weeks of roadblocks protesting water shortages hampering their protection against the coronavirus pandemic, entire communities across Honduras are now taking to the streets to protest the lack of food and income due to the measures taken by the Juan Orlando Hernández administration to contain the outbreak. A “national and absolute curfew” imposed on March 16 has left hundreds of thousands without an income and led to shortages in staple goods.

The protests against food shortages began on March 24, when public transportation workers in northern Tegucigalpa led crowds to block the main highways of the country’s capital. Bus driver Luis Guzmán told AFP, “We live day by day and have no fixed income. If we don’t work, we don’t eat.” He added that his 4-year-old daughter “is asking for food and I have no money to even buy beans.”

The government promised on March 20 to deliver food to 3.2 million Hondurans in monthly quotas for the rest of the year, under “Operation Benevolent Honduras.” At a meeting with food industry executives one week later, however, María Antonia Rivera, one of the country’s vice presidents, announced that the

government is only now preparing 800,000 “Benevolent bags” and that the amount of food will ultimately depend on “negotiations” with suppliers.

Finance Minister Rocío Tábora then declared, “There is an international criterion that each person needs an intake of fundamentally 2,200 daily calories, so we have to make sure that we provide that.” Careful not to infringe on their profit interests, she pleaded with the suppliers to give favorable prices, since “we have partial resources.”

Luis Colindres, head of the National Entrepreneurship and Small Business state agency, added that the armed forces will be in charge of delivering the bags, which will have a supply for 15 days, prioritizing those who have lost their daily income due to the pandemic.

Throughout the weekend, protesters across the country continued to block highways to demand food. On Saturday, a protester in the southern town of Colonias Unidas told HCH, “After 14 days of being locked in our homes without being able to work, there is nothing to eat... Honduras will not die of the coronavirus; it will die of starvation. If we have to die fighting in the streets, we will.”

Workers blocking the road to Olancho in eastern Tegucigalpa told *Criterio* that they lack food, water and soap, and that they are compelled to find drinking water in “a nearby river that is contaminated with fecal material and solid waste.” The blockade was disbanded when riot police arrived.

In Panama, which has 17 coronavirus casualties, the highest in Central America, price gouging is spreading and a “total quarantine” was established, allowing people to go out only to buy food and medicine. Hundreds in the poorest neighborhoods of Panama City have looted supermarkets for food.

At Curundú, residents began hitting pans on Saturday night to protest that they have not received a meager “Benevolent Bonus” announced by authorities, but anger grew and people flooded the streets, turning trash bins on fire and raiding stores. When militarized police showed up a shootout broke out; no casualties were reported.

President Laurentino Cortizo declared a national state of emergency as early as March 13 and formed a working group for “preserving social order.” While Panama officially has no army, the government has mobilized the police, border patrol and Institutional Protection Service units, whose patrols are using camouflage uniforms, high-powered rifles and armored vehicles with machine guns mounted on them.

A particularly urgent situation is developing in the northwestern Argentine province of Salta, where a wave of deaths of children from starvation is worsening due to the coronavirus quarantines and the willful negligence of the authorities. With promised “food bags” and medical care not arriving and, at least in one case, the outright rejection of a request for transportation to a hospital, three children of five years of age or under died between Tuesday and Thursday.

With five million inhabitants suffering from “severe food insecurity,” according to the FAO, the Argentine government of Alberto Fernández has focused its policy to placing the poorest neighborhoods under siege with police and arresting 33,000 people during curfews in a ten-day period.

In Mexico, raids to loot supermarkets occurred in the states of Mexico, Oaxaca and Puebla, and are apparently being organized on social media. In response, the Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) administration has deployed the Federal Police, National Guard, Army and Navy against the population, while the Cyber Police is cracking down on social media networks.

AMLO has not yet issued a “state of emergency” declaration; however, his Morena party has already enshrined the military’s unfettered deployment in the constitution, effectively subordinating other constitutional rights to a timeless state of war or national emergency.

As in Mexico, Honduran hospital workers also carried out protests earlier in March after seeing none of the \$400 million supposedly approved by the

government to deal with the pandemic. At the National Cardiopulmonary Institute in Tegucigalpa, which was especially selected for treating severe COVID-19 cases, workers carried out a wildcat strike to protest a lack of water, masks and protective suits.

There are 103 ventilators in Honduras but only 13 are available for saving people with severe cases of COVID-19. After specialists found that 140 new ventilators bought by the government are unfit to deal with coronavirus symptoms, the official in charge of the purchase, Roxana Araujo, simply responded: “That is what was found and what was bought.”

These shortages are the result of decades in which health care has been ransacked to incentivize its privatization and to meet debt payments to Wall Street and the local financial elite. The deals between Honduras and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) exclude health care, water and sanitation from the spending floors aimed at avoiding societal collapse.

The police-state and dictatorial response of the Latin American ruling class to the pandemic is centrally aimed at protecting some of the highest levels of social inequality in the world. The priority of the local oligarchies is remaining competitive for foreign investments, while at the same time continuing debt payments to the financial vultures and spending on a further buildup of the armed forces.

As the National Committee of the Socialist Equality Party wrote in its statement on “How to fight the COVID-19 pandemic”: “Two irreconcilable interests of two classes stand opposed to each other. For the capitalists it is a question of securing their profit interests and ensuring that their property and wealth remain untouched. No measures are to be taken that impinge on their interests. The working class is concerned with the interests of the broad mass of humanity, proceeding not from private profit but from social need.”



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