

El Salvador's president brands gangs and opposition as “plagues”

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In the early hours of Saturday, prisoners in El Salvador were pulled out of their cells, stripped to their underwear and forced to tightly press against each other on the floor while officials ransacked their cells. With 323 confirmed COVID-19 cases and eight deaths, President Nayib Bukele warned on Monday that there is a “total community transmission,” meaning that the outbreak is far larger than reported.

Outrageous images of hundreds of half-naked prisoners forced to sit pressed against each other in tightly packed rows could easily be interpreted as unauthorized leaks. Some of the photos, however, were shot by the government’s own photographers and shared by Bukele himself and several government agencies, while the international media was welcomed into the prison to film the horrific spectacle.

The operation began after the government declared a “state of emergency,” citing an alleged uptick in murders across the country, ostensibly ordered by gang leaders from within the prisons. There was no evidence provided to support this claim, nor any found in the raids. Detained gang leaders were placed in isolation, and members of rival gangs recklessly placed in common cells.

The policy is itself murderous and dictatorial. On March 10, Bukele himself ordered an end to an existing “state of emergency” in prisons to focus on ending overcrowding and “preventing the coronavirus in the prison population.” Even the 1983 constitution, established by a fascist military junta, does not conceive of the extra-legal fabrication of a “state of emergency.” It lists a “regime of exception” that suspends most constitutional rights, but not “the right to life, physical and moral integrity” being denied to prisoners. The measures have endangered staff at prisons, and the whole country.

There are a number of objectives behind this “anti-gang” campaign as the pandemic crisis intensifies, but “protecting Salvadoran lives” is not among them. The crackdown is less a reaction to killings than a calculated class response to growing social opposition. All across the world, the capitalist ruling class is concluding that protecting their

wealth and profit interests during the deepening crisis is incompatible with democratic forms of rule.

On Friday morning, Bukele met with US Ambassador Ronald Johnson to call US President Donald Trump. This was followed by public statements of mutual support. Later that day, the government and El Salvador’s main business organizations announced a plan to “reactivate the economy,” including a \$1 billion program involving mostly loans for corporations and small businesses and a mere \$50 million for food assistance.

“We have been developing this economic proposal with international organizations and investors who buy Salvadoran bonds,” commented Economy Minister Nelson Fuentes. Bukele added: “Our priority will continue to be protecting the health and lives of Salvadorans; however, in parallel, we’ll give a push to our economy to hold on and start the engines of our creativity, entrepreneurship and labor.” Shortly afterward, he ordered the assault on the prisoners.

On the one hand, corporations are demanding a “gradual” re-opening of nonessential businesses under unsafe conditions, even though the quarantine measures have been extended until May 16.

On the other, the working class, whose majority survive day-to-day in the informal sector, demands aid and continued social distancing measures and other protections necessary to contain the virus. Widespread protests broke out and were repressed by riot police on March 30, when the government closed the offices handing out \$300 stipends to the most impoverished sectors.

Under these pressures, the response by the Salvadoran oligarchy is defined by its total subordination to US imperialism, as administrators—within the domain of the Salvadoran nation-state—of the supply of cheap labor, natural resources and a limited consumer market for transnational corporations and finance capital, combined with the sacking of public finances for bondholders.

Behind his “anti-gang” campaign, Bukele is openly moving to undermine the Legislative Assembly and establish

a personalist dictatorship with the support of the armed forces. Since his electoral campaign last year, he has based his strategy on exploiting popular disdain for the corrupt traditional parties.

The Assembly is controlled by the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) and the Republican National Alliance (ARENA), which shared power from the end of the civil war in 1992 until 2019, consistently defending the interests of the ruling elite through austerity, privatizations, the maintenance of poverty wages and the creation of US-trained special forces who have been associated with death squads.

Despite direct violent threats, they have responded to Bukele's policies with mild criticism, while doing everything possible to prevent the outbreak of protests. They have approved record spending for the military and a \$2 billion loan to deal with the pandemic.

On February 9, Bukele occupied the Assembly with troops, claiming the legislators were tied to the gangs and demanding the approval of a loan for the further buildup of the armed forces. A crowd of a few thousand Bukele supporters gathered outside, demanding that troops drag the opposition deputies out.

Last Thursday, Bukele fabricated a "significant suspicion" of a COVID-19 outbreak among legislators to force the suspension of the Assembly's proceedings that day. On Sunday, he claimed on Twitter that the government has not seen a "single cent" of the money approved by the Assembly, adding, "Sooner or later, they [legislators] will pay for their anti-patriotic actions." And on Monday morning, his legal secretary, Conan Castro, spoke of "signs," again without providing evidence, that the political parties are financing the reported uptick in killings.

Seeking to create a war atmosphere, Bukele then shared pictures of a meeting with the security cabinet, held around 1 a.m. on Monday.

While initially aimed against the Congress and gangs, both of whom he has referred to as "plagues," the ultimate target of this authoritarian drive is the working class. Bukele seeks to mobilize fascistic layers of the armed forces and his politically disoriented supporters as shock troops against social opposition from workers and youth. This is signaled by numerous comments on official publications featuring the pictures of the huddled prisoners. One man wrote, "What a treat to spray Baygon [insecticide]—all the cockroaches together." Another wrote, "Maybe they'll die faster that way, all those killer dogs."

This weekend, police arrested Aaron Elías Martínez, after he recorded a video on social media claiming to lead an armed group against "all those who want to agitate people against the president." In what was clearly a response to the

arrest, Bukele sought to promote death squad activity as a legitimate defense. He tweeted, "The use of lethal force is authorized for self-defense and defending the lives of Salvadorans." He added that his government will provide legal defense to those "unjustly accused of defending the lives of honorable people."

The "social quarantine" measures have already been focused on attacking due process and normalizing police abuses much more broadly than in the prisons. Over 2,000 people, mostly informal workers, have been arrested. As of April 22, the Human Rights Ombudsman had reported 778 accusations against the police and military regarding "illegal detentions" and "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment" as part of the quarantine. *El Faro* reported that on April 15, seven soldiers and a police official entered and raided rooms in at least six homes in Mejicanos, threatening people and warning them not to leave their homes, while potentially contaminating them.

The conditions are being prepared to employ the quarantine measures to crack down on opposition, force increasing numbers of workers to risk infecting themselves and their families at work, and cover up the human toll from COVID-19 and a lack of food and other basic necessities.

This would require the participation of the largest *maras*, or gangs, MS-13 and Barrio 18, which effectively control most districts and hold large business interests. They have also been documented in the harassment of militant workers at *maquiladoras* at the service of their owners.

Such barbaric plans, however, have not made a reckoning with mass opposition in the working class. Class actions against a premature return to work are already a global phenomenon. Workers, however, need to draw the necessary conclusions from the official response to the pandemic. Opposing the turn to dictatorship and the indifference of the government to their lives and livelihoods requires a revolutionary struggle of the international working class against the capitalist profit system, which is the source of these processes. In El Salvador, this means the building of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International to lead the working class to fight for power and socialism.



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