

Colombian security forces massacre 10 youth protesting police murder

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11 September 2020

On Wednesday night, Colombian police used gunfire to massacre at least 10 people protesting the police killing of Javier Ordóñez, a 43-year-old lawyer and taxi driver, the previous night in the capital city of Bogotá.

A video posted online showed Ordóñez being repeatedly beaten and tortured with tasers by police officers, who detained him for allegedly violating the COVID-19 quarantine. The scenes, with Ordóñez pleading for his life, saying “I’m choking,” and witnesses asking the officials to stop, recalled for many the police murder of George Floyd in the United States.

In employing deadly force against protesters, the Colombian government of far-right President Iván Duque is following the lead of its imperialist patron in Washington, the Trump administration, which has used the federal forces to kidnap protesters in unmarked vans in Portland, Oregon, and carry out the targeted killing of a demonstrator.

The massacre in Bogotá has only fueled more anger. Numerous protests are being planned for the rest of the week in Bogotá, Medellín and Barranquilla, marking a resurgence of the mass protests against social inequality that erupted across Latin America last year. Colombia itself witnessed an initial wave of protests across university campuses and strikes in the public sector.

Since the early afternoon Wednesday, as the video of Ordoñez’s murder went viral, protests led by youth began spreading across predominantly working class neighborhoods in the Bogotá metropolitan area and other cities of the country. Focusing their anger on the police, demonstrators, according to police reports, burned down 22 local police stations and defaced 49 others.

After initially employing tear gas, stun grenades and charges with batons and vehicles, after dusk, the National Police began using live ammunition in various parts of the city, in a clearly coordinated and systematic fashion against unarmed protesters.

The Bogotá district authorities have reported that seven civilians were killed and 248 were injured, 66 of them from gunfire. In the working class municipality of Soacha, which belongs to the Bogotá metropolitan area, the mayor confirmed that three additional demonstrators were killed. At least three of those wounded are still in intensive care.

Videos shared on social media show groups of police officers employing their firearms to enforce an undeclared curfew. Others are seen chasing down lone protesters and executing them. Without any potential danger nearby, police in uniform and plainclothes indiscriminately shot volleys of gunfire in at least three separate locations, as confirmed by *Semana*. Police were also filmed damaging businesses to scapegoat demonstrators.

In a radio interview, the partner of the youngest of the victims, 17-year-old Jaider Fonseca, described the incident: “The police began shooting in the air and then forward at people who were protesting with rocks. [Jaider] ran as soon as the shots started; his only defense was a door, he hid, but still was hit with four shots; he was riddled.”

“They were not killing anyone, they were not stealing, they were demanding their rights,” she concluded.

The Duque regime and police authorities have unabashedly initiated an intensification of the crackdown, including the deployment of 300 more troops to Bogotá to assist the police in the repression.

Duque himself has shown absolutely no remorse. Instead, he threatened anyone who dared call the police “killers,” and denounced “the violence, vandalism and hatred ... any incitement to act above the law.”

Despite the fact that the one-sided and criminal character of the onslaught was clear from widely seen videos, the chief of the National Police, Gustavo Alberto Moreno, ominously defended the role of the police, declaring: “This police, with humility, recognizes its

errors, but also celebrates the heroic work of thousands of police.” Moreno has received training from the Secret Service and FBI and worked as a police attaché in Washington D.C.

The Minister of Defense, Carlos Holmes Trujillo, who oversees the military operations of the Pentagon’s closest ally in the region, threatened demonstrators with further police-state measures. “Regarding those who participated in the violent acts and vandalism yesterday, we have identified profiles on social media that made publications against the police ... all of them aimed at discrediting the performance and service of the National Police.”

He then offered bounties of \$13,500 for information that helps “to find and identify” the participants in the protests.

Bogotá Mayor Claudia López of the Green Alliance acknowledged that she was presiding over repressive operations Wednesday from police headquarters, but claimed on Twitter that no order was given to employ firearms. Amid confrontations between the heavily armed police and the unarmed youth, however, López continuously denounced the “vandalism” and “violence.”

Later on Thursday, López sought to deflect any blame by pointing her finger at “the commander of the National Police, that is, the President of the Republic,” while adding, “ we have serious and solid evidence of the indiscriminate use of firearms by members of the police.”

These responses from the political establishment confirm that the ruling class is rushing headlong toward dictatorial forms of rule. Any calls for administrative wrist-slapping are aimed at diverting mass social anger, relying on the corporate media, the “opposition” politicians and the trade unions to continue appealing for “police reform.”

This was already exemplified earlier this year, when a handful of suspensions and internal “inquiries” were used to quiet down a scandal over a profiling and spying operation by military intelligence against over 100 journalists, activists and politicians.

The Colombian ruling class is well aware that it sits on a social powder keg. The Duque government recently extended until June 2021 a \$43 monthly stipend per household, which has barely kept about 2.6 million of the poorest households from starvation during the pandemic crisis.

Employer associations have welcomed this program, with the small cost of \$2 billion, as a means of averting mass upheavals. However, this miserly amount has done little or nothing to protect the growing layers of

impoverished workers and unemployed from the virus and economic desperation.

According to the state statistical agency DANE, 90.3 percent of confirmed coronavirus deaths correspond to the poorest three strata of the population, which qualify for subsidies for utilities, while the richest sixth stratum accounts for just 1 percent of COVID-19 fatalities.

Juan Daniel Oviedo, director of DANE, told *El Tiempo*, “Poor households, with elderly and less educated adults, unable to abide by isolation rules due to the need to find their sustenance, were more exposed to the pandemic, which is reflected in their higher mortality.”

Colombia has the sixth highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the world (686,851) and the 11th highest confirmed death toll (22,053). DANE, however reported that as of August 23, there were 7,257 suspected COVID-19 deaths that were never tested, and more than 10,000 excess deaths above the official count. Bogota is the country’s pandemic epicenter with a third of the cases.

Meanwhile, the wealth of Colombia’s billionaires listed by Forbes has only increased during the pandemic to over \$13.7 billion. Now, the Colombian oligarchy, in partnership with its financial and corporate backers on Wall Street and in Europe, is moving to greatly intensify the exploitation of Colombia’s working class and natural resources.

The Duque government lifted most lockdown measures on September 1, except for schools, social gatherings and indoor entertainment.

The massacre of protesters in Bogotá signals the willingness of the Colombian ruling class to employ deadly violence and authoritarian rule to crush opposition from below to its criminal response to the pandemic. It has already shown its indifference to the lives of workers claimed by COVID-19.

The turn to authoritarianism by capitalist governments in Colombia and internationally derives from the efforts of the capitalist class to defend its massive wealth amid record levels of inequality and widespread social devastation.



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