

US Congress threatens to cut funding for Philippines police and military

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In an extraordinary move that will further intensify the political crisis swirling around President Rodrigo Duterte's government in Manila, the United States Congress will consider suspending funds for the Philippines police and armed forces.

The proposed "Philippine Human Rights Act" was introduced by Democratic Party congresswoman Susan Wild, co-sponsored by 25 other Democrats and backed by the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy. Wild introduced the bill on Wednesday, saying it was in response to the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, signed into law by the "brutal regime" of President Duterte in July. The law, she said, had been used to "ramp up efforts targeting labor organizers, workers and political opponents. This law allows suspects to be detained by the police or military without charges for as long as 24 days and placed under surveillance for up to 90 days."

Coinciding with the introduction of the bill, Facebook announced on Wednesday that it was removing "hundreds" of pro-Duterte accounts based in China and the Philippines, some of them allegedly linked to the Philippine military and police.

Duterte's "anti-terror" law is extremely repressive and anti-democratic. It is part of the drive by governments around the world to strengthen the powers of the police, military and intelligence agencies in order to suppress rising working-class struggles against social inequality and war.

The Democrats, however, are indifferent to the many human rights abuses carried out by the Duterte regime. Wild's statement to Congress, which ended with the words, "Let us make clear that the United States will not participate in the repression, let us stand with the people of the Philippines," was profoundly hypocritical.

John Kerry, former Democratic Secretary of State

under President Barack Obama, met with Duterte following his election victory in 2016 and pledged \$32 million in US funding for the Philippines police and death squads to carry out a murderous "war on drugs." The Commission on Human Rights estimates that as many as 30,000 people, overwhelmingly poor and working class, have been killed in Duterte's reign of terror, which was also endorsed by President Trump.

Wild's proposal exploits the pretext of "human rights" in pursuit of the strategic aims of US imperialism. The Trump administration, with the bipartisan support of the Democrats, is ramping up its provocations and preparations for war against China, which is seen as the major obstacle to US domination over the Asia-Pacific region and the world economy. Washington can no longer tolerate the wavering of its former colony, the Philippines, which would be on the front lines of a war between the nuclear-armed powers.

The Duterte regime has engaged in an extremely fraught balancing act, seeking to maintain the US alliance while strengthening investment and trade relations with China, in particular to encourage the building of infrastructure in the countryside to benefit sections of Philippine industry.

Duterte has also withdrawn from some US military exercises and in February responded to US economic sanctions by threatening to pull out of the Visiting Forces Agreement which has allowed US troops to be stationed in the Philippines for the past two decades.

These moves raised the ire of sections of the Philippine elite who are intimately tied to Washington, including the top military brass. These forces are coalescing behind Vice President Leni Robredo in a growing movement to oust Duterte. Robredo, despite being part of Duterte's cabinet, is a political rival from

the opposition Liberal Party.

From 2016 to 2019, the United States provided the Philippines with military assistance amounting to US\$554 million, according to the Stratbase ADR Institute think tank. The US legislators' threat to withdraw this money is calculated to either force Duterte to fully align against China or, failing that, to compel the military to oust him and install a more pliant pro-US regime led by Robredo.

Duterte, feeling the ground move from under him, sought to appease the US in his address to the United Nations General Assembly on Tuesday. For the first time, he declared that the 2016 ruling by the Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) that the Philippines had sovereignty over areas of the South China Sea also claimed by China, was "beyond compromise and beyond the reach of passing governments to dilute, diminish or abandon. We firmly reject attempts to undermine it."

The Obama administration had urged the Philippines to seek the PCA ruling as part of its efforts to justify US militarisation against so-called Chinese "expansionism." Current US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has repeatedly threatened to "take firm action" alongside other countries against Beijing's "unlawful claims" in the South China Sea. For the past four years, however, Duterte had shelved the territorial dispute in the interests of securing investment and loans from China.

Duterte's speech was denounced by pro-US opposition figures as four years too late. Senator Risa N. Hontiveros-Baraquel described it as "lip service to the idea of sovereignty," telling a webinar: "We must resume operations against the poaching in our Exclusive Economic Zone, escort and protect our fishing vessels, reinforce our presence and facilities on the features we occupy, join joint patrols with other nations in the West Philippine Sea."

Another opposition legislator, Manuel Cabochan III, a former Navy lieutenant, told the *Manila Bulletin* that Duterte's words had to be followed by action, including participation in naval exercises in the South China Sea. In a xenophobic tirade, Cabochan attacked "illegal immigration and the employment of Chinese in our country" and denounced Duterte's "preference for Chinese-owned or -linked firms in government projects."

This elite opposition to Duterte is fully supported by the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). After enthusiastically backing Duterte's rise to power in 2015–2016, the CPP and its allied organisations are now playing a major role in channeling the widespread anger and hatred of workers and youth towards Duterte behind the rival, pro-US and anti-Chinese factions of the bourgeoisie, including the military.

In a statement yesterday the CPP "applauded" Wild and fellow Democratic congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez for backing the legislative threat to withdraw military aid to the Philippines. "They deserve the gratitude of the Filipinos who seek an end to the widespread killings, abductions, torture, village hamletting and other gross abuses," a CPP spokesperson declared.

Far from opposing the Philippines armed forces, however, CPP founder Jose Maria Sison has repeatedly stated that he has "friends" among the top military brass, and has called on these "pro-US" and "patriotic elements" to intervene against Duterte. The CPP has also declared that it is preparing to enter negotiations for an end to the New People's Army's armed conflict and a possible coalition with Robredo if she replaces Duterte.

The Stalinists advocate a regime change operation that will install a new government resting on the military and determined to join the US in a war against China. This does not represent a progressive alternative to Duterte. The working class must decisively break from the CPP's perspective and take up the fight for international socialism, which corresponds to workers' own independent class interests, in opposition to every faction of the national bourgeoisie.



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