

Guatemalan government cracks down on anti-austerity protests

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Amid a deepening and historic social crisis in Guatemala, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and Hurricanes Eta and Iota this month, thousands joined demonstrations across the country to oppose austerity.

The demonstrations on Saturday and Sunday were triggered by the Congress's approval of a 2021 budget that included cuts to programs against hunger, public education, care for coronavirus patients and protection of human rights.

The restoration of funds for food programs at the last minute failed to appease demonstrators, who demanded major increases in social spending.

Hundreds on Saturday entered the Congress building in Guatemala City and set a hall on fire, initially without the intervention of police who were present.

The main demonstration of about 7,000 people, involving families with children, marched to the Plaza de la Constitución, about four blocks from the Congress.

"The resignation of the legislators and President, the blocking of the 2021 budget and anger for the lack of aid to communities affected by the storms were the main slogans," according to *El Periodico*, which also reported demonstrations in the cities of Alta Verapaz, Petén, Chiquimula, San Marcos and Quetzaltenango.

A protester told the AFP, "Guatemala cries with blood; the people have had it. We have been living while getting stomped for over 200 years." Others denounced the lack of economic aid during the pandemic.

Immediately after the fire at the Congress, the Police Special Forces moved in against the protesters and passersby at the Plaza and neighboring streets with anti-riot gear, tear gas canisters and a water cannon. Fourteen demonstrators were treated at the nearby hospital due to beatings and effects of the tear gas—one lost an eye, and another remains in serious condition—and 40 were arrested.

Right-wing President Alejandro Giammattei also

exploited the incident at the Congress to threaten demonstrators. "We will not allow vandalism against public or private property. Whoever gets caught participating in these criminal events will feel the full weight of the law," he tweeted.

The main business umbrella group CACIF also called for the punishment of those responsible for "vandalism" and "violent actions."

A day before the protest, however, Vice President Guillermo Castillo called on Giammattei for both of them to resign, expressing the fears of a social explosion. "I have expressed very clearly to the President that things are not going well," he said in a video posted on social media. He then stated that such a maneuver was necessary to ultimately ram through a budget based upon "austerity to avoid further debts."

In 2015, a series of mass protests compelled the Congress to strip immunity from then President Otto Pérez Molina, who was implicated in a vast corruption scheme, and forced his resignation. At the time, the unrest was ultimately suppressed by NGOs and parties with ties to Washington, which sought to channel it behind support for the US-sponsored International Commission Against Impunity (CICIG) that had investigated Pérez Molina.

This resulted in his replacement by the austerity-driven administrations of Jimmy Morales and Giammattei who ran "anti-corruption" campaigns aimed at covering up the class interests they represent and their subordination to US imperialism.

As the pandemic spreads freely amid a full economic reopening and ending of pandemic aid to those left without income, coronavirus deaths are spiking to levels not seen since July. More than 100 deaths were reported just on Wednesday and Thursday, with the total number of registered deaths now surpassing 4,000.

Extreme weather events, intensified by global warming, have also affected the livelihoods of millions. After five

years of devastating droughts, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras have been ravaged this year by the tropical storms Amanda and Cristobal in June, and Eta and Iota in November, which caused widespread devastation of plantations.

The Guatemalan government estimates that 120,000 hectares of plantations were destroyed involving 30 different crops. The authorities have reported 59 dead and 100 missing from both storms. Eta caused a landslide that buried the entire indigenous village of Queja, where families fear the number of missing could be much higher.

Residents in several affected areas have already carried out demonstrations demanding aid, including a protest when Giammattei visited the town of Cobán for a photo op with emergency rescue teams.

By June, the NGO Action against Hunger had already estimated that the food-deprived population would double to 1.2 million in Guatemala due to the pandemic. They cited the loss of half a million jobs and a drop in remittances.

The UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) has estimated a similar increase in people living under official poverty, reaching 51.6 percent.

Exploiting the pandemic, the government issued \$3.8 billion in debt, but only 15 percent of this was actually spent on the pandemic response, or about \$570 million. By comparison, 15 percent of the 2021 public budget, or \$1.9 billion, will go to servicing interest payments.

While there is undoubtedly rampant government corruption, the continued attacks against the social conditions of workers, youth and peasants and the imperviousness of the ruling elite to mass suffering are the result of broader historical and international processes.

Whatever the pressures from below, the government and all capitalist political parties are ultimately beholden to the tiny financial and corporate oligarchy in Guatemala and its imperialist patrons. Ever since its independence from Spain in 1821, the traditional landed oligarchy and rising commercial bourgeoisie never pursued the tasks carried out under the bourgeois democratic revolutions in the United States and Europe, chiefly the breakup of landlordism and its independence from the colonial powers.

This process was embodied by the Aycinena clan, which controlled vast swathes of trade and land across Central America before and after the 1821 independence from Spain, and continues its lineage up to Guatemalan ex-president Álvaro Arzú Irigoyen (1996-2000) and his

family's network of partnered business groups.

Researchers have also traced back the Diaz-Durán family fortune in Guatemala, whose ministers and businesspeople strongly backed the privatizations in recent decades, to the landowners that settled after the Spanish conquest of what would become El Salvador.

Guatemala also has one “self-made” dollar billionaire, Mario López Estrada, who came to control the country's main mobile phone service company Tigo (formerly Comcel), after serving as Communications Minister when the company was handed monopoly control of the sector, while subsequently receiving numerous tax exemptions and cuts to public service bills.

During this entire period, the interests of this ruling elite, from access to credit and foreign investments to production and export markets, remained entirely subordinated to those of Wall Street and the US and European corporations.

Today, in order to pay the mountain of debt accumulated in the bailout of its banks and corporations, US and European imperialism are ruthlessly intensifying their exploitation of workers globally, their neocolonial plundering and the pursuit of hegemony against geopolitical rivals, chiefly China. This is what lies behind Guatemalan capitalism's inability to meet the most basic social needs and its turn to police-state repression.

To oppose austerity, the Guatemalan working class must organize independently of all “anti-corruption” capitalist forces and the pro-capitalist trade unions and build a new political leadership under a socialist and internationalist revolutionary program.



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