

Mass protests in Colombia continue into second week amid deadly repression

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Amid Colombia's worst economic crisis in recorded history and its deadliest wave of COVID-19 infections, hundreds of thousands have joined mass marches, roadblocks and other protests across the South American country every day for the last week.

The recent protests began with a national strike on April 28 called by the National Strike Committee, a coalition of trade union confederations, farmers' associations and student groups formed in 2019 to channel growing unrest in the working class behind negotiations with the far-right government of President Iván Duque.

The strike was triggered by Duque's announcement of Latin America's first COVID-19 tax overhaul, as the Colombian ruling elite seeks to lead the region in placing the entire burden of the pandemic crisis on the shoulders of the working class.

Supposedly aimed at providing a fixed income of between \$20 to \$150 dollars per household during the pandemic, the proposal introduced a sharply regressive 19 percent sales tax, including on food and essential services, as well as an additional tax for incomes as low as \$700 per month. Credit agencies applauded the bill as providing a "structure of long-term sustainable income" paid for by the working class.

Defying a hypocritical court order banning marches on the pretext of COVID-19 risks, demonstrators filled the streets of downtown Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Barranquilla and Ibagué, as well as smaller cities. Stores and most public services came to a virtual standstill on April 28, while May Day saw the largest crowds so far.

As spontaneous demonstrations continued to erupt outside of the control of the National Strike Committee, Duque deployed the military to "assist" the police in the repression, which has turned in a systematic and coordinated fashion to the use of live ammunition.

Announcing the deployment of troops, Duque threatened those "who want to intimidate society through violence, vandalism and terrorism and believe that they will defeat the institutions under this mechanism."

On Friday, ex-President Álvaro Uribe, the leader of

Duque's ruling party and his political mentor, all but confirmed that the murderous repression is being ordered from the highest levels of the state by tweeting: "Let's support the right of soldiers and police to use their weapons to defend their integrity and defend people and goods against the criminal actions of vandalic terrorism."

Uribe was recently released from house arrest in a politically-motivated ruling despite dozens of open investigations over his role in creating and financing fascist paramilitary militias responsible for killing hundreds of thousands and displacing millions of Colombians.

Videos shared widely on social media show police officers openly carrying firearms, including rifles, and shooting at demonstrators. The Francisco Isaías Cifuentes Human Rights Network, moreover, sighted plainclothes police on motorcycles with covered license plates shooting at demonstrators in Cali.

Fearful that the repression is only radicalizing and mobilizing wider layers of the working class in Colombia and across the region, UN and European Union officials nervously condemned the "excessive force" used by the police and appealed to protesters to be "calm."

The US administration of President Joe Biden, even as it hurls provocative accusations against Russia, China and Venezuela, has remained silent over the repression in Colombia, US imperialism's closest political and military ally in Latin America.

For decades, under Republican and Democratic administrations alike, Washington has provided billions in weapons and military training to turn the Colombian military into the second largest in the region, serving as a bastion of US corporate and financial interests in this oil-rich region, including in Washington's regime change preparations in Venezuela. This same US-armed and trained military is now being unleashed against unarmed crowds of workers and youth.

As of Tuesday, the Duque government has acknowledged the deaths of 18 civilians and one police officer during demonstrations, while the police reported 431 arrests. The

Education Workers Federation (FECODE) has reported 27 deaths, 726 arbitrary detentions, six cases of sexual abuse by security forces, and 12 youth who have lost their eyes to “non-lethal” projectiles.

Having lost the support of the Liberal Party and other right-wing forces for his tax bill, Duque announced Friday that he would ask Congress to drop, at least temporarily, its most hated provisions.

The decision only emboldened the protests, and the National Strike Committee continues to struggle to remain in control by calling for another day of mass demonstrations on May 5. Compelled by the social anger to advance broader demands, union leader Luis Miguel Morantes called for sending troops back to their barracks, dismantling the special forces unit ESMAD, discarding Bill 010 that provides a greater role to private health care providers, mass vaccinations and a universal income of at least \$260 per month, among other demands.

Throughout the consistent escalation of the class struggle since the national strike on November 21, 2019, Colombian capitalism has demonstrated that it is completely impervious to the urgent social needs of the masses. The Duque administration has been allowed to continue maneuvering to implement further austerity and privatizations even after repeated massacres of workers and youth.

Last September, the police killed 13 demonstrators and injured at least 75 others with firearms after a rebellion erupted in Bogotá over the police killing of Javier Ordóñez.

Along with the trade unions, the ruling class has relied heavily on the pseudo-left senator and ex-presidential candidate Gustavo Petro to direct all appeals back behind the Duque administration. Since protests began last week, he has demanded that demonstrators only oppose this or that “reform” and not Duque or the security forces themselves. Even as he feigns outrage at the murderous repression, he insists that Duque, the police and military are “not the enemies.”

On Monday, he called in a tweet for “every police, every soldier of the fatherland” and “youth and workers on the street” to “fraternize” and “hug.” This, as video after video has been posted on social media showing cops brutally beating young protesters.

These criminal efforts to sow complacency among workers and youth as the ruling class and imperialism carry out a deadly turn toward dictatorship in Colombia and internationally have been further aided by the Socialist Workers Party (PST), a pseudo-left outfit founded by the Argentine anti-Trotskyist Nahuel Moreno and oriented toward the trade unions.

In a statement Monday, the PST noted that “the masses, which are outside of their bureaucratic control, have

remained on the streets” and appeals for “the trade union organizations affiliated to these centrals ... to replace that bureaucracy.”

Workers must be wary of such maneuvers to replace trade union officials for others that employ more radical phrases to better channel unrest into the same dead end. The entire political establishment and trade union apparatus, along with its pseudo-left apologists, speak for layers of the middle class with material ties to the capitalist state and corporate management.

During 2020, 3.5 million Colombians fell under the official poverty threshold—a per capita monthly income of \$87. A staggering 42.5 percent of the population now lives below the poverty line. At the same time, the country is recording record levels of COVID-19 deaths, reaching 490 deaths per day and 75,164 deaths in total.

Beyond night curfews and a rotation of restrictions to visiting commercial locales based on personal ID numbers—measures which have proven wholly inadequate—the Duque administration and local authorities have rejected any measures that may impinge on the profit interests of corporations and banks.

The uprising across Colombian cities has unleashed the largest mass demonstrations seen in Latin America since the revolt in Chile in 2019. It is part of a global movement of the working class against the policies of death and misery during the pandemic. The International Committee of the Fourth International calls for the building of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees for the working class to unite these struggles and take the pandemic response into its own hands, as the only way to administer timely vaccinations, provide the necessary economic aid for nonessential workers to shelter at home and, ultimately, eradicate both the COVID-19 virus and the capitalist system that has allowed it to kill millions.



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