

Colombia's mass protests continue amid reported "disappearance" of 379 demonstrators

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The Colombian Missing Persons Search Unit, a government-sponsored agency, announced Thursday that 379 demonstrators remain "disappeared" since mass protests began on April 28, ignited by proposed taxes on essential services, food and workers' incomes.

The agency investigated 471 missing-person reports from 26 different organizations and located only 92 of the protesters, including one who had been killed. The figures are a stark jump from the 89 cases of missing demonstrators reported on May 4 by the government's ombudsman, out of which the National Police claimed to have found 47.

The real extent of the repression across the country, which has involved the deployment of the US-trained and armed military by the far-right government of President Ivan Duque, is only beginning to emerge. The NGO Temblores has documented 37 demonstrators killed and 98 injured by police gunfire. There have been 934 reported cases of arbitrary detentions and 11 cases of sexual violence by security forces, while 26 protesters have suffered eye injuries from "non-lethal" projectiles.

In just nine days, over 500 demonstrators are either missing or have been killed by the security forces. These figures alone already evoke the memory of the mass killings and "disappearances" by US-backed fascist-military dictatorships that governed much of South America during the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

The repression exposes a Colombian ruling class, backed by imperialism, that is entirely determined to force the working class to bear the entire cost of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the other hand, the hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions that have taken to the streets amidst

the deadliest surge of the pandemic in the country have demonstrated the bravery and determination of the working class and youth.

This is the largest popular uprising in Latin America since the mass demonstrations that erupted in Chile and Bolivia in 2019. The death toll this week in Colombia has already surpassed the confirmed deaths of protesters at the hands of the police and military in Chile (34) and Bolivia (32).

The latest protests against the Duque administration follow a university student strike in 2018 to demand funding for advanced public education, the mass protests that began with a national strike on November 29, 2019, which was triggered by an earlier tax plan and saw three demonstrators killed, and the mass rebellions in September 2020 against police killings that were also repressed with live ammunition, resulting in 13 people killed and 75 injured by gunfire.

Moreover, the overseers of the 2016 "peace accord" with the Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas have reported the killing of 904 local social leaders, including many disarmed combatants, as fascistic paramilitary forces continue to operate at the behest of transnational corporations and local landowners to displace peasants and seize land.

While the UN and European Union have nervously denounced the "excessive force" used by the police, the US administration of President Joe Biden has effectively given the actions of its main political and military ally in the region an endorsement by merely calling for "moderation."

Undeterred by the repression and unconvinced by Duque's maneuver to temporarily cancel his tax plan, thousands have continued to join marches, roadblocks

and vigils for the victims across Colombia. On Friday, the capital Bogotá saw five different demonstrations led by university students and public-school teachers.

The driving force behind the recent demonstrations is the refusal of the government to take the necessary measures to treat the social and health care devastation wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even as only 4 percent of the population has been fully vaccinated and COVID-19 deaths reach all-time highs of nearly 500 per day, the government refuses to implement lockdowns of nonessential services and provide enough income for workers and small businesses to weather the crisis.

Nearly 468,000 people lost their jobs during the pandemic, as official unemployment reaches 16 percent and 42.5 percent of the population now lives with less than \$87 per month or \$2.90 per day, the official poverty rate.

The Colombian opposition parties and the National Strike Committee, led by the main trade union confederations, have struggled to contain the demonstrations and channel them behind a National Dialogue with Duque, while at the same time illusions are being promoted about the pseudo-left senator and ex-guerrilla leader Gustavo Petro ahead of the 2022 general elections.

Countless commentaries in the corporate media have stated clearly that the uprising in Colombia is part of a global struggle to determine which class will pay for the pandemic crisis. The protests in Colombia, writes *Foreign Policy*, “offer a warning to other Latin American nations: Passing the bulk of the pandemic debt bills onto the poor and middle class could lead to significant pushback in the streets.”

After three years of growing protests, however, the recent uprising has shown an increasing inability of the politicians, NGOs and trade unions to divert social anger, as it becomes crystal clear that there is nothing to negotiate with Duque or the Colombian financial oligarchy for which he speaks.

Referring to Latin American governments, the financial outlet Bloomberg reported Wednesday that, despite increasing commodity prices, “few have money for social spending that could keep citizens afloat.” And, if taxes are “concentrated on companies and the rich... researchers warn of a scenario where companies hire less.”

In plain terms, finance capital will punish any country that raises social spending or takes consequential lockdown measures against the pandemic with capital flight, further accelerating the loss of jobs and the inflationary rise in prices.

A dialogue with Duque or his replacement by Petro or another pro-capitalist and nationalist politician would only be aimed at demobilizing the protests and politically disarming the working class as preparations for further austerity, regressive taxes and repression continue.

This was made clear by an op-ed titled “Let’s let Petro govern now!” published Thursday in *El Tiempo*, owned by Colombia’s richest man, Luis Carlos Sarmiento, who saw his net worth increase \$2 billion to \$11 billion during the pandemic.

“Let Mr. Gustavo Petro rise to power under pressure, to cover the fiscal hole left by [Duque’s predecessor] Juan Manuel Santos, to keep all the past and future subsidies, keep the teachers happy (so that they don’t strike like they did two months after Duque took office), the taxi drivers, from Uber and other platforms, health care workers, the associations, the private and public sector and the country in general.”

“Let him show the international credit risk agencies that Colombia is viable for loans and investments without the tax reform,” the piece continues, and concludes: “If installing Petro ends this chaos and achieves peace, let him rise to power today.”

The real allies of Colombian workers are their class brothers and sisters internationally, as demonstrated by the significant solidarity actions in Germany, New York, Canada, Chile and other countries.

Only the political mobilization of the working classes, uniting its forces across Latin America, the United States, Europe and beyond under a socialist and internationalist program can overthrow the dictatorship of finance capital and resolve the pandemic crisis in the interests of the workers and the toiling masses.



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