

Colombia enters third week of protests as Bogotá and Washington prepare to escalate repression

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Every city and major town in Colombia saw tens of thousands join mass marches, roadblocks and other protests on Wednesday, the third day of the “National Strike” and the fourteenth day of protests in the South American country.

The “strike” was called by the National Strike Committee, which is composed of the main trade union confederations and farmers associations, after it suspended talks with the government of far-right President Ivan Duque during the first day of the so-called “National Dialogue” on Monday.

Since 2019, the unions and the government have repeatedly employed a combination of talks with intermittent calls for “National Strikes,” during which the unions fail to mobilize the powerful oil, automotive and other industrial sectors, while working to dissipate popular anger.

On Tuesday morning, Duque visited the third largest city and epicenter of the demonstrations, Cali. There he met with the leadership of the Colombian military, Interior Ministry and Justice Ministry. Then, he announced that his administration would finance one semester of free tuition for university students from the lowest social income strata and appealed for the continuation of the “National Dialogue.”

The National Strike Committee has deliberately refused to advance a clear strategy or set of demands, while its leaders feed their contacts in the corporate media with calculated and radical-sounding statements attempting to control the demonstrations.

However, the protest movement remains decentralized, leaderless and isolated from the massive support that exists among strategic sectors of the working class within Colombia and internationally, facilitating the police-state maneuvers to break it apart.

While marking a more advanced stage of the class struggle, the uprising is following the same path as the mass protests in Chile, Bolivia, Puerto Rico, Honduras, Haiti and Colombia itself in 2019. Efforts by pseudo-left elements in the affluent middle class to idealize their leaderless character and spontaneity, or to subordinate them to futile appeals to the trade union bureaucracies are aimed at assuring their further isolation and demobilization.

In Cali, roadblocks and marches have been the largest in the marginal neighborhoods where the poorest sections of the working class live and where demands center around necessities, access to online classes and social infrastructure.

According to government statistics, the Cali metropolitan area saw its official poverty rate (living under \$87 per month) increase from 21.9 percent to 36.6 percent between 2019 and 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has been particularly devastating for the poorest fifth of the population in Cali, which saw its real income drop a massive 50.1 percent. Nationally the poverty rate rose to 42.5 percent, and the poorest quintile saw even greater drops in real income in Bucaramanga (55.1 percent), Ibagué (50.9 percent) and the capital Bogotá (50.3 percent).

Meanwhile, ICU beds are full in Cauca, the broader Valle de Cauca Department and cities across the country, as COVID-19 deaths remain at record levels nationally. This social and health care catastrophe fueling the growing popular uprising is by no means unique to Colombia.

The same policy of prioritizing profits and attracting foreign capital over protecting lives and livelihoods has had similar results across Latin America, where social tensions are reaching a breaking point. Last year, the

region lost 34 million jobs and saw 22 million people fall under the official poverty line, with the ranks of the poor swelling to one-third of the region's 600 million residents. Meanwhile, Latin America represents 30 percent of confirmed COVID-19 deaths globally, while accounting for less than 9 percent of the world's population.

The Duque administration is preparing to escalate the crackdown, redeploying hundreds of troops to Cali on Sunday, while Defense Minister Diego Molano has placed a target on the backs of the city's impoverished workers.

On Tuesday, Molano tweeted: "In 13 days of protests, terrorists infiltrated in marches have left 849 police officials injured." He added: "In Cali, criminal organizations continue inciting violence."

Already, as many as 548 reports of missing demonstrators have been filed. The government ombudsman claims that 168 of them remain missing, and the Unit for the Search of Missing Persons gives the number at 379. Forty protesters have been killed by the police, and 1,003 have been subjected to arbitrary arrests, according to the NGO Temblores.

The crackdown is being carried out not only with the support of the Biden administration in Washington, but in close coordination with the Pentagon.

The current Colombian military official embedded in the US Southern Command, Army Col. Héctor Iván Macías, explained on March 29 to the Inter-American Dialogue that with daily strategizing with the Pentagon, the Colombian military launched "Operation San Roque" in response to the pandemic.

In a tacit admission that US-Colombian military cooperation is based on an assessment that the pandemic presents a potential crisis for capitalist rule itself, Col. Macías said the plan seeks to "maintain the governance exercised by the president of the Republic, local leaders and institutions."

For several days during the ongoing repression, the senior enlisted adviser of the U.S. Security Assistance Command, "The Army's Face to the World," was "holding key leader engagements, briefings, meetings and sidebars with senior Colombian enlisted leaders," as reported on May 5 by the US Army website.

"The presence of U.S. forces, living and working everyday with their partners at [the Tolemaida] Colombian airbase, speaks volumes to the relationship between the two countries as they work side-by-side to enhance Colombian military capabilities and promote regional stability," states the article, referring to one of

the seven military bases used by US forces in Colombia.

This extends into cybermilitary operations, with the US Army tweeting Tuesday about its "first-ever virtual cyberdefense exchange with the Colombian Military Forces." This happens as demonstrators and journalists on the ground report internet shutdowns amid the repression.

So far, the documented killings have been carried out by the police, including plainclothes officers, and not soldiers. Since its official establishment in the 1950s, however, the National Police has operated within the Ministry of Defense and been developed by US imperialism as a counterinsurrectionary force to combat left-wing guerrillas and social opposition.

The National Strike Committee and the pseudo-left have focused on demanding the dismantling of the Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squadron (ESMAD) and a reorganization of the police. This framework seeks to divert workers and youth away from opposing the entire Colombian state, its US imperialist patrons and the capitalist system.

By opposing the necessary lockdowns and sufficient pandemic aid to workers, moreover, the Colombian trade unions and the entire political establishment have demonstrated their commitment to defending the profit-making activities of the Colombian banks and corporations, which are themselves dependent upon Wall Street.

The Colombian uprising is part of a global counteroffensive of workers everywhere against the policy of "social murder" advanced by the capitalist ruling elites globally. The International Committee of the Fourth International calls for the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to consciously organize and unify this struggle based upon the perspective of world socialist revolution.



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