

# Trade unions work to “de-escalate” protests in Colombia

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On Wednesday, another “national strike” took place in Colombia, involving countrywide demonstrations and partial shutdowns of workplaces, small businesses and public transportation. It was the 35th day of continuous protests and roadblocks against social inequality and the mishandling of the pandemic by the far-right government of President Iván Duque.

Despite the continued militancy of protests, which have seen the participation of millions of people, the so-called National Strike Committee led by the main trade unions is working to shut them down.

On Tuesday, the committee called for a “de-escalation” of the roadblocks, including the lifting of 40 “resistance points.” In a press conference, the head of the teachers’ union Fecode, Nelson Alarcón, explained that, with this de-escalation, “the national government today has no excuse not to sign the pre-agreements.”

The committee’s demands include a reorganization of the police, free tuition for the poorest university students and a basic income during the pandemic. In themselves, these measures would not even begin to address the enormous social crisis and the anger toward the repressive forces driving the protests; however, such “pre-agreements” have been broken by Duque after each wave of mass demonstrations since 2018.

“Normalcy in Colombia terrorizes because people are enduring hunger, thousands of youth are unemployed,” Pipe, an activist who has manned the roadblocks in Cali, the epicenter of the demonstrations, explained to *Efe*. “While the president speaks of dialogue during the day, in his preferred networks, people come out at night in luxury cars to shoot down kids.”

While working hand in glove with the discredited trade unions, whose “de-escalation” only serves to isolate the remaining blockades and facilitate the

massacres, the Colombian ruling class and US imperialism are escalating the repression.

In a brief report, the NGO Commission for Justice and Peace explains that on Tuesday, demonstrators at roadblocks were shot at by plainclothes paramilitary forces at 2 p.m. and then by police on motorcycles at 3 p.m. At 4:30 p.m., men in unmarked vehicles took pictures of the demonstrators as military helicopters continued to intimidate them overhead.

The *Efe* report notes that the demonstrators fear that ending the protests will give way to a wave of persecutions and murders.

In a harrowing interview, a young woman describes that her 16-year-old brother, Daniel Esquivel Sánchez, was captured by the police on his way back from working at a construction site and killed. “They took him in that armored vehicle and my brother showed up burned. We could hardly recognize him. His hands are being soaked, so that they can take his fingerprints—a 16-year-old boy!”

As of May 31, the Institute for Development and Peace Studies (Indepaz) documented 71 killings in the context of the repression. Moreover, the Commission for Justice and Peace reported witness accounts of mass graves, dismemberment sites and torture centers where paramilitary groups acting in unison with the police were taking Cali demonstrators, presumably among those “disappeared.”

The bourgeois press has sought to justify the repression claiming that, if it were not for the roadblocks, the country’s economy would be undergoing a dramatic recovery due to rising commodity prices. “Without roadblocks, coffee and oil would already be driving the reactivation,” reads a headline in *El Tiempo*, owned by Luis Carlos Sarmiento, who already saw his net worth increase

from \$2 billion to \$11 billion during the pandemic.

This is coming from a venal ruling class whose social spending is only 2.4 percent of its GDP, compared to the second lowest in Latin America of 7.8 percent in Honduras.

Meanwhile, US imperialism, the main sponsor of Duque and the Colombian state, also views the protests as a threat to the interests of US banks and corporations, and as a potential spark for similar uprisings across the continent.

Washington has nakedly backed the brutal repression in Colombia. Last Friday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with the Colombian foreign minister Marta Lucía Ramírez and expressed the Biden administration's "concern and condolences for the loss of life during recent protests in Colombia and reiterated the unquestionable right of citizens to protest peacefully."

That same day, the Biden administration issued a 2022 request to Congress for \$453.8 million in aid for Colombia, which includes \$41 million more than Trump's latest request and \$140 million for Colombia's police.

This followed a call on May 24 between US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and his Colombian counterpart, Diego Molano, during which Austin "congratulated Colombia on its advances as a NATO Global Partner [the only one in Latin America], and expressed his appreciation for Colombia's contributions to international and regional security."

That Friday, with the backing of the Biden administration, Duque announced a tripling of its military deployment in the streets to 7,000 troops across the country, chiefly in Cali. This was accompanied by a curfew in the Valle del Cauca Department where Cali is located, which began at 5 p.m. on Saturday.

The Mining Ministry said that roadblocks have left \$81.6 million in losses for coal exports, while oil production fell to its lowest level since the 2009 crisis, with losses estimated at \$41 million, on top of \$92.6 million in losses for local gas stations. Significantly, the employer group Asopartes estimates losses of \$272 million for the entire auto supply chain, which directly employs about 52,000 workers. Besides commerce, however, the sector most affected has been coffee exports, with 700,000 tons paralyzed and losses of

about half a billion dollars.

These products comprise about 70 percent of the country's exports. Added to the drop of 21.4 percent in exports for 2020, the roadblocks have dealt a significant blow to the profits of the local ruling class, which explains the brutality it is employing to clear them.

However, except for coffee, the losses are but a small fraction of total production within Colombia, not to speak of the ability of the large transnationals to offset the impact through global markets.

As COVID-19 cases and deaths continue to reach new heights, the ruling class has made clear the intransigence with which it will use social immiseration as a battering ram to force workers into unsafe workplaces and to provide further tax cuts, cheap labor and other incentives for foreign capital.

The uprising in Colombia triggered by these policies has demonstrated the incompatibility between the interests of the capitalist class and those of workers in Colombia and internationally, who ultimately control the levers of the global economy. This raises urgently the need for building a genuine revolutionary leadership under a socialist and internationalist program—a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*.

At this critical juncture, this leadership must fight for protesting youth and workers to send delegations to the main factories, mines, warehouses and plantations and to mobilize workers in these key sectors around a common set of demands, independently of the trade unions and all other pro-capitalist and nationalist organizations and parties. Efforts must be made simultaneously to coordinate this movement with the expanding class struggle internationally.



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