"This is about the people removing the yoke of imperialism"

# Thousands march in Costa Rica against right-wing Chaves administration

**Andrea Lobo**
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At least 10,000 people marched from downtown San José, Costa Rica, to the presidential building on Wednesday to protest the escalation of the assault on living standards and deepening social austerity under President Rodrigo Chaves, who is openly following the diktats of his former employer, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

Broad sectors of the population already engaged in an escalating wave of social protests against Chaves coalesced around numerous demands in the largest demonstration since at least 2019, with the defense of public healthcare and education being the most central issues.

Since thousands protested in August 2022 to oppose cuts to universities, the country has seen an ongoing wave of protests, including in March 2023 by farmers' associations, in July and August 2023 by high school students against budget cuts, along with several partial strikes and demonstrations by healthcare workers, among others.

This upsurge takes place in the context of a resurgence of the class struggle internationally. In the rest of Central America, Panamanians opposing a destructive mining concession and Guatemalans resisting an attempt by prosecutors to prevent the elected President Bernardo Arévalo from taking office have carried out mass protests and roadblocks for weeks.

The demonstration on Sunday was convoked by a "Mesa de Diálogo Social" and the "National Front of Struggle for the Defense of Social Gains" comprised of over 60 organizations, including trade unions, public universities, high school and university student groups, professional associations and neighborhood, peasant and farmers movements.

The leaderships of these organizations explicitly seek to channel the social ferment in the working class behind talks with the Chaves administration.

For decades, the political establishment, including all political parties, trade unions and university and state bureaucrats have betrayed countless efforts by workers to resist attacks against their social and democratic rights. There is nothing to be gained for workers through back-room talks between these forces.

Workers and youth marching in San José, on the other hand, expressed a clear radicalization and militant determination to put a stop to these attacks on their social and democratic rights.

**Yorleny**, a nurse at the Jiménez Núñez Clinic in San José, explained: "We must raise our voices. We must demand that every day we are paid what is fair. The sacrifices our families make—one deprives oneself of many things—at least it should be recognized economically. We are demonstrating because of the waiting lists [for medical services], because of all the lies they are telling that the Caja is bankrupt while the Government does not pay the debt it owes. We have had our salaries frozen for many years. We do not earn the millions that they say public employees earn. We are nurses and we are paid as auxiliaries. They overload us with work and don't pay us for those nursing services. And if something happens, we are judged as nurses."

The Chaves government outright refuses to pay an accumulated debt to the healthcare and pension system, called the "Caja," of $5.8 billion. Meanwhile, next year's public debt repayments for bankers and bondholders will amount to $11 billion, which could more than cover the debt to the Caja. But the 2024 healthcare budget will not even cover two-thirds of its yearly operational needs, according to official figures.

Her co-worker **Yamileth**, added: "For every 10 people there is one assistant or nurse. It's too exhausting, we work so hard and don't get any recognition at all. Besides, with the pandemic, they recruited a lot of people, and as soon as it was over, they sent a lot of people home. Now they are unemployed. Internationally, it's the same issues. Frontline workers were laid off, and now we are all facing money problems to provide for our family."

**Elena**, a worker and student at the Tecnológico college (TEC) said, "There are many countries in South America that for years have been taking to the streets to defend their rights and we have been late. We all should demand and have the right to demand improvements in education, food, security."

"The time to fight is now," **Sergio**, another worker at TEC said. "We are running out of time. If we could unite across countries, it would be much better. The cuts are obviously due to the government's preference to distribute funds to other financial entities to further impoverish the country. Like education. If it were to be private, only the rich would be able

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to study."

A **co-worker** explained: "It is a profitable business. Without public education, without access, people are cornered into going into debt for private education. Because of the long waiting lists, if you are deprived of access to public healthcare, you have to pay for private services."

**Marta**, a professor at TEC, noted: "I am a product of a public school, a public high school, and a public university. In Costa Rica, education has always been our "Sunday dress," something we can be proud of, and now it is not. Public education is being limited in all its aspects. What some people in the government want is to have people without education."

As a result of a massive assault against the jobs, wages and benefits in the public sector, compensation has dropped from over 7 percent of GDP in 2013 to 3.66 percent last year. Meanwhile, the fastest growing expenditure has been servicing the debt. The government plans to spend nearly half of the 2024 budget in debt repayment and interests to the local and global financial aristocracy. This compares to 22.3 percent for employee compensations, 20.6 percent for education, 13.1 percent for social programs, 7.9 percent for security, 3.1 percent for infrastructure, 2.8 percent for healthcare and 0.4 percent for the environment.

Chaves has prided himself on opposing the constitutionally mandated 8 percent of the GDP for public education and plans to spend 5.2 percent next year.

**Gustavo**, a student at the University of Costa Rica who was holding a Palestinian flag, connected the fight for social rights in Costa Rica with the struggle in defense of Palestinians and against war.

"I came to march against the government, in defense of the Caja, but this takes place in the context of a genocide being carried out in Palestine by the illegitimate and terrorist state of Israel," he explained and added:

> Today, in spite of all the propaganda in favor of Israel in the imperialist media, people are no longer buying the story that there are child terrorists and that they organize terrorism. It is not true. The genocide that Israel has been carrying out for decades is terribly disproportionate in terms of human lives killed and technical, scientific, military and other tools that Israel has against the Palestinians, who use extremely rudimentary weapons to defend themselves. The numbers speak for themselves.
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> I connect their struggle with the struggles here, which are precisely about the people removing the yoke of imperialism.
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> They only care about the people paying with what we have won historically, such as the Caja, so that they can have their profits. We must be very conscious of this: the children who are dying in Gaza, the brave people who are rising up in Niger and other African countries, the Ukrainians and Russian brothers and sisters fighting—because in the end they are brothers!—have much more in common with us here in Costa Rica trying to get rid of the IMF cuts, than politicians who are very Costa Rican but who sell us out. Costa Rica is not an island isolated from the world. It is a cog in a much larger machine.

**Johanna**, an activist of the Committee of Struggle for Housing La Morocha in the working class suburb of Alajuelita explained that Chaves is cutting funds for the Bank for Housing (Banhvi), the CEN-CINAI [daycare] and other social programs.

Banhvi, which develops social housing and provides housing assistance, warned earlier this year that the cuts planned by the Chaves administration would leave 6,000 families homeless and affect the jobs of 28,000 construction workers.

She explained:

> If they cut off our water and electricity, how can we iron our children's uniforms? The struggle for housing should not be cut back any further. We are hundreds of families who need that housing. Not only for me, but for the children.
>
> There are single mothers who cannot work. I am one of them. I have four children; how can I work?
>
> Drive out those officials who want to make cuts against the poor, who work so hard to pay for decent insurance for our children! They want to take this away from us. It is not fair.

A fellow member of the committee added: "We are broke. We are in bad shape. We have had to struggle too much."

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