

Killings of striking teachers in Panama fuel mass protests against major copper mine

Andrea Lobo
10 November 2023

The killing of two more demonstrators in Panama on Tuesday has further escalated the movement of strikes, mass protests and roadblocks that for three weeks has brought much of the country to a standstill to demand an end to all mining in Panama.

The movement was sparked when Congress and the right-wing Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) administration of President Laurentino Cortizo rushed through a 40-year renewal of the control of the largest mine in the country by the Canadian-based transnational First Quantum.

The decision blatantly disregarded a 2017 Supreme Court ruling declaring unconstitutional the existing contract for the Minera Panama, which produces copper and is the largest open pit mine in Central America. The Ministry for the Environment warned that the new deal simply ignored a record of logging and flooding with mining waste of thousands of hectares of Caribbean rainforest well beyond the conceded area.

Even Bloomberg wrote in March that it “reviewed hundreds of official documents that reveal non-compliance and possible environmental damage by First Quantum to the Panamanian patrimony, which is part of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor.”

The expedited approval touched a nerve among broad sectors who have witnessed the tiny local oligarchy and its political representatives fill their pockets as they turn the country into a playground for global finance capital. Amid boasts of the fastest economic growth in the region and having become the “Latin American Singapore,” enormous wealth and luxury have piled up next to widespread poverty and social austerity.

On October 23, three days after the vote in Congress, teachers launched a still ongoing national strike, students shut down the University of Panama, tens of thousands of workers joined mass demonstrations across several cities, and workers and indigenous groups placed roadblocks at key points along the Pan-American highway.

The mine, which produces about 1.5 percent of world copper output, has been able to continue its operations given

its location next to the Punta Rincón International Port. Nonetheless, during the first week of protests, fishermen attempted briefly to block the port with their boats.

President Cortizo has sought to appease the protests by decreeing an indefinite ban on future mining concessions and renewals, and floating the idea of a referendum; however, Congress and Cortizo have rejected the main demand to shut down the First Quantum mine and are merely waiting on a new Supreme Court ruling.

At the same time, the ruling class has responded with police repression and an avalanche of propaganda criminalizing the demonstrations.

In this context, 77-year-old Kenneth Darlington, a retired lawyer with US-Panama citizenships, confronted educators blocking the Pan-American Highway in Chame on Tuesday and shot down elementary school teacher Abdiel Díaz Chávez and Iván Rodríguez Mendoza, the husband of an educator. Darlington was arrested at the scene.

Videos of the cold-blooded murder against these unarmed protesters were soon shared on social media, enraging broader sectors of the population. In previous weeks, a teacher in Chiriquí, Tomás Cedeño García, and protester Agustín Morales in Colón had been run over and killed at roadblocks, while police repression has led to numerous injuries and hundreds of arrests.

The country has been rocked by several massive strikes and protests in recent years. Only last year, the country was brought to a halt by teachers, construction workers, truckers, students, and indigenous communities to protest rampant inflation, which further cut their standard of living. Officially, over a fifth of the country lives under the poverty line, but the number surpasses 80 and 90 percent in the eastern and predominantly indigenous regions.

The main slogans and chants in the current protests blame the entire political establishment for “selling the future.” A professor marching in Panama City on Wednesday summed it up on Twitter (X): “For 33 years, seven administrations have progressively destroyed the country.”

Throughout the Cortizo administration and those of his

predecessors, however, the trade union bureaucracies of teachers and construction workers leading the protests, Asoprof and SUNTRACS, have consistently worked to channel the unrest behind talks with officials. This has done nothing to stop the cuts to education and healthcare demanded by the IMF, the prostitution of the country as a tax haven for the global rich, or the endless corrupt concessions to private firms used to give away the public treasury and natural resources.

While mouthing radical-sounding phrases, the union bureaucrats are again focusing on making appeals and delivering statements to the Cortizo administration and Congress. They have combined demands to repeal the mining concession with a tireless promotion of nationalism, presenting this as a “patriotic struggle” and those dead as “national martyrs.” This strategy only serves to isolate the struggle.

The mass protests in Panama are only “national” in the most superficial sense. This is not merely a struggle of Panamanians against a greedy and polluting Canadian firm. It is part of a global resurgence of the class struggle against the drive to brutal neo-colonial subjugation and war by the US-NATO axis and its attempts to secure control over strategic locations and resources. Panama has both.

The corporate and financial elites seek to unload all economic, ecological and social burdens from the reshuffling of entire industries and war preparations on workers and other oppressed layers.

The premium placed on copper, lithium, and other strategic minerals globally is not being driven by concerns over climate change, but competition over new markets like electric vehicles and, above all, by this geopolitical scramble for global hegemony led by a US-NATO axis.

Even more critical than copper, the Panama Canal oversees 6 percent of world trade, connecting 1,700 ports in 160 countries. It has already been forced to slow down due to droughts. Any threats to its operation and the hubs of transnational corporations located in Panama City carry massive implications for global supply chains already strained by war and years of pandemic.

In the final analysis, workers in Panama confront all the most powerful imperialist ruling elites. Wall Street firms have lowered Panama’s credit rating and warnings have appeared in the international media that protests not only set an unfavorable precedent for investors in Panama, but may disrupt the plans of global finance capital more broadly.

Columbia University researcher Adrian Duhalt told *El País*: “I anticipate that we will see more examples of what you are seeing in Panama in countries with similar contexts, such as in the rest of Central America, in Africa, in some countries in South America.”

The fight against mining and energy giants in economically backward countries is part of the same struggle of workers in the auto and other industries in North America and beyond to defend their jobs and living standards as companies plan hundreds of thousands of layoffs as part of their transition to electric vehicles and automation.

Nearly 34 years ago, in December 1989, the George H.W. Bush administration launched “Operation Just Cause,” a military invasion of Panama involving 26,000 troops, purportedly to capture one man: dictator Manuel Noriega, formerly a CIA asset. The onslaught, including the indiscriminate bombing of the El Chorrillo shantytown around the Panamanian military headquarters, led to thousands of civilian deaths, with the true number still unknown.

This was the opening salvo in an ongoing violent eruption of US imperialism to secure its global hegemony in response to the imminent Stalinist dissolution of the USSR at the time. This agenda has today morphed into the genocide in Gaza, which is part of the plans of the US-NATO axis for war against Iran, Russia and China. There are no bounds to the brutality with which imperialism will execute its interests.

Meanwhile, as shown by its hostility to demonstrators and their regressive policies, including measures to divert proceeds of the canal to their own bank accounts, the Panamanian bourgeoisie is entirely hostile to the working class. Its class interests are subordinated to attracting foreign capital by offering low taxes, and labor and environmental deregulation. An inherent aspect of this arrangement throughout history has been corruption.

This is also not solely an “ecological struggle,” as presented by much of the media. While the protection of forests, ocean and river basins is of enormous importance, the protests and references to the “future of Panama” are essentially about which social class controls society and the global economy: the capitalists on the basis of profit and war, or the international working class on the basis of meeting social needs.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact