

Mass roadblocks over fuel hikes in Guatemala threatened with repression

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On September 11, the government of Bernardo Arévalo deployed the Guatemalan Army alongside the National Civil Police to break up roadblocks against soaring fuel prices, giving demonstrators 30 minutes to disperse.

Interior Minister Marco Antonio Villeda declared that the protests had “mutated from demonstrations into criminal acts.” Anyone blocking a road would “be arrested and placed at the disposal of the courts,” their vehicles confiscated.

Defense Minister Henry Sáenz went further. “We are not talking about demonstrations,” he said. “We are talking about coordinated activities with very dark interests.” Three army forces and 23 operational commands were mobilized.

At their height that day, 14 blockades were reported across 10 of Guatemala’s 22 departments. The Constitutional Court ordered the roads cleared within six hours, under threat of removing officials who failed to comply.

They closed the Periférico at Bethania in the capital, the Atlantic highway, CA-2 West at Cuyotenango and CA-9 North in Zacapa. Transmetro Line 18 was suspended, cutting a bus route workers depend on.

Nothing has been settled. A blockade was again reported on September 16 on CA-1 West near Huehuetenango.

The community council in La Bethania said on September 13 that residents could return to demonstrations or blockades.

The next day market traders association, transportation groups and indigenous organizations (28 Cantones and the Sololá Mayorship) launched an indefinite occupation of the Plaza de la Constitución. “This September 15 there is no independence,” said Julio Rivas of the Association of United Market Traders, “because they have us sunk in an economic and fuel crisis.”

A price shock made in Washington

Between January 1 and July 20, diesel rose from Q24.92 to Q39.54 a gallon—58.7 percent. By September 16 it had reached Q50.89 (\$6.67), the highest price in Guatemalan history. Regular gasoline hit Q44.09 (\$5.79).

Food prices have registered a major increase as a result, with corn, the most important staple, increasing from Q550 per quintal (100 pounds) to Q600 in just three weeks.

Set against wages, the figures are devastating. The 2026 minimum wage is Q4,252 (\$557) a month; and the average monthly income is Q2,748, and 65.9 percent of those employed work informally, without contract or protection. Current price hikes are resulting in major deprivation.

Guatemala imports all its fuel, and the chief cause of the price increases lies in the US-Israeli war against Iran and the collapse of traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, through which a fifth of the world’s oil passes in peacetime.

In the first week of September, an average of only ten commodity ships a day crossed the strait. Brent crude rose 19 percent in a month and has since topped \$102 a barrel.

Guatemalan workers are being made to pay for a war waged half a world away over the control of oil. So are workers everywhere.

In the same weeks, Mexican truck drivers blocked several of the country’s eleven commercial border crossings after US Immigration and Customs Enforcement revoked their B1 work visas.

The drivers are being ruined by the same administration whose war on Iran is driving up Guatemalan fuel costs. These are not separate grievances but a clear demonstration of the potential for uniting the struggles across borders.

The protests in Guatemala are not socially homogeneous, however. The transport employer chambers demand tax exemptions and direct subsidies—public money transferred to fuel importers and bus owners, leaving the price mechanism intact.

The indigenous leaderships that were demonstrating alongside these bodies demanded the opposite: measures against fuel speculation, frozen transport fares, state action on food prices and enforcement against hoarding. They

explicitly rejected subsidies.

Significant sections of the working class have been mobilized through their neighborhood associations, and behind market traders and some rural communities; however, the working class has not intervened massively in the struggle yet. Significantly, the trade union federations have issued no national call to action and no appeal for a strike.

The large business chambers, on the other hand, calculating losses at some Q1.1 billion (\$144 million) a day, demanded the government deploy force and bring criminal charges against the organizers.

Congress approved a decree on September 8 capping diesel at Q39. Ten days later it had still not taken effect, held up by procedural objections. Debate was pushed to September 22.

Arévalo, who was elected running as a democratic, left-wing answer to the far right advancing across the hemisphere, said on a televised address on September 13, that a convergence of local politicians, drug trafficking networks and gangs are behind the blockades: “The spurious electoral interests of some and the criminal interests of others converge.”

He alleged that in Río Hondo, Zacapa, politicians had paid people to man the roadblocks and described similar arrangements in Cuyotenango and Villa Nueva. He named no one and produced no evidence.

The charge is not rhetorical excess. Guatemala has joined the Trump administration’s “Shield of the Americas,” launched in March around a commitment to “using lethal military force” against cartels.

To brand a movement of bus drivers, truckers, market traders and village councils as narco-financed is to place it inside that framework and to justify its repression.

On May 19, Arévalo spoke by telephone with War Secretary Pete Hegseth. The *New York Times* reported, citing three people familiar with the talks, that he agreed to US airstrikes and other military action on Guatemalan soil. The government denied it and insisted only the Guatemalan Congress may authorize foreign troops. It confirmed, however, that Defense Minister Henry Sáenz had requested US “cooperation.”

That is the same minister who now calls workers blocking roads over the price of diesel “coordinated activities with very dark interests.” In August, Hegseth announced that the government of Guatemala, along with new far-right regimes in Colombia and Honduras, had agreed to joint US operations on their respective territories.

Guatemalans know from historical experience what such operations truly target.

In 1952, the civilian Jacobo Árbenz government

expropriated uncultivated estates. United Fruit, which held 550,000 acres of which 85 percent lay idle and whose annual profits were twice the revenue of the Guatemalan state, lost more than 400,000 acres.

Under the leadership of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and CIA Director Allen Dulles, who had both arranged deals for United Fruit, the Dwight D Eisenhower administration authorized Operation PBSuccess in August 1953 to overthrow Árbenz. A CIA-orchestrated invasion in June of 1954 installed Col. Carlos Castillo Armas as the country’s US-backed dictator.

What followed was 36 years of civil war and some 200,000 dead. The UN-backed truth commission attributed 93 percent of the carnage to the state and found it committed acts of genocide against the Maya.

The apparatus built to defend United Fruit’s interests was turned, decade after decade, against strikes, land occupations and the villages of the highlands. That is the historical function of the “cooperation” his ministers have requested.

Arévalo’s biography runs through this record. The son of President Juan José Arévalo (1945-51), he served in Guatemala’s embassy in Israel from 1984 to 1988, when Israel was a principal arms supplier to a military fresh from its scorched-earth campaigns against the indigenous population.

His party, Semilla, founded in 2017 out of a Washington-connected NGO milieu, has its major constituency among the professional upper middle-class. Arévalo entered the 2023 runoff with 15.51 percent of the first-round vote—fewer than the 18.17 percent of ballots cast null—and won with just a 44.98 percent turnout.

On taking office, he thanked Washington and the army for securing his inauguration.

Living standards cannot be protected by pressuring the government that has already deployed the military against the population, criminalizes its protests and invites the Pentagon to collaborate.

The working class requires independent organization—in Guatemala, Mexico, the United States and internationally—against war and the capitalist system that produces it.



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