

Class struggle erupts across Latin America: How did such unpopular right-wing governments come to power?

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Last Wednesday, workers at 670 hospitals and clinics of the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) rejected a wage agreement backed by the union and the government of President Claudia Sheinbaum. About 282,000 of 475,000 eligible workers voted, and tallies posted by rank-and-file workers showed lopsided majorities against the deal, which included a wage cut in real terms. Workers are demanding at least 10 percent and an end to the shortages of medicine and supplies, with rank-and-file groups preparing a national strike.

The same day, thousands marched in Bogotá and other cities in the first national strike against Colombia's new right-wing president, Abelardo de la Espriella, who had signed a decree the day before ordering a crackdown.

On October 15, Argentina's state workers' union, the ATE, struck nationally against President Javier Milei's deregulatory mega-decree 70/23.

In Chile, 709 miners at Centinela have been on strike since October 7, and supervisors at BHP's Escondida, the world's largest copper mine, rejected the company's offer by 94.8 percent. Tens of thousands of Chilean students and teachers marched earlier this month against austerity by the ultra-right President José Antonio Kast.

In Bolivia, President Rodrigo Paz deployed troops around La Paz against protests over an 83 percent increase in the price of diesel, declaring, "Whoever wants to blockade wants death." This follows a 51-day general strike earlier this year against fuel hikes in Bolivia.

In Brazil, the October 25 runoff pits President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva against the fascist Flávio Bolsonaro, who leads the polls, after months of strikes by bank workers, postal workers, teachers and autoworkers against Lula's austerity measures.

In Venezuela, health and education workers, university employees and retirees marched on the Miraflores presidential palace on October 13 demanding the unfreezing of wage scales and the restoration of collective contracts. The police blocked their path. Similar protests took place before governors' offices across the country.

These struggles are part of an international movement. On September 25, more than 45,000 German school students struck against conscription under the slogan "War and crisis devour your life." More than 800,000 students and workers marched across France, and tens of thousands marched "against wars and rising living costs" in Milan, Italy. On both sides of the Atlantic, the ruling classes are paying for war and its consequences by cutting social spending, wages and pensions, and the working class and youth are saying, "Enough!"

In Latin America, workers and youth have passed through definite political experiences in the past decade. They have seen how the dictates of finance capital and imperialism are enforced by the governments of the Latin American "pink tide" no less than the traditional right-wing parties,

while the union bureaucracies and the pseudo-left groups provide cover.

The mass upsurge of struggles demonstrates that the recent election of far-right forces like de la Espriella, Kast, Paz and Milei expressed not a shift to the right by the working class and poor, but above all a desire for radical change and an urge to punish those political forces imposing social austerity. Within weeks, the new governments have proven to represent an even more brutal form of the same policies, while accelerating the preparation of open dictatorship and fascism.

The international character of the struggles now erupting confirms that they are driven by global processes: imperialist war to redivide the globe, the recolonization of the hemisphere by US imperialism, trade war and the demands of the financial aristocracy. Objectively, they pose the overthrow of the existing political and economic system and point toward a global socialist movement, not a return to a refurbished nationalist and reformist "left," however loudly these forces claim to defend democracy against fascism. These aims are not yet conscious or organized, and this is exploited by the union bureaucracies and the pseudo-leftist groups of the middle class to promote illusions in capitalist politics.

Unpopular governments

The right-wing governments elected over the past year never commanded popular enthusiasm. Ten months after Kast won Chile's presidency, his approval rating has fallen to 27 percent, according to Criteria, with 64 percent disapproving. Keiko Fujimori's approval in Peru fell from 60 to 42 percent in her first month in office, according to Datum, and 52 percent of Peruvians told the IEP polling firm that her government is "more of the same." Milei's approval rating hovers around 35 percent. Guatemala's Bernardo Arévalo, elected in 2023 as an anticorruption reformer, now has the lowest approval of any president in the region, 31 percent. In Venezuela, 63 percent disapproved in June of Delcy Rodríguez, who has administered the country on Washington's behalf since US forces abducted Nicolás Maduro on January 3.

The policies pursued have the same character everywhere. Kast's 2027 budget raises security spending 9.1 percent while freezing everything else and suspending school meals for 1.6 million students. Paz scrapped the diesel subsidy under a \$1.9 billion agreement with the International Monetary Fund and has ruled under a state of exception since June. The war against Iran sent Brent crude above \$100 a barrel in September. In Guatemala, diesel reached a record 50.89 quetzales a gallon and highway blockades spread to 10 of the country's 22 departments. Arévalo sent in the army and claimed demonstrators were tied to drug traffickers.

Transport workers blockaded roads in Honduras over new fuel increases.

The governments still identified with the pink tide offer no alternative. Lula enters the runoff after courting bankers and enlisting his vice president, Geraldo Alckmin, as guarantor of “fiscal responsibility,” while calling for a broad front to defend democracy. In the first round, 33.4 million Brazilians abstained, the most since 1998.

Sheinbaum retains approval ratings near 70 percent, based largely on cash transfers and her posture of resistance to Trump. But the IMSS vote and earlier mass strikes by teachers, as the government prioritizes interest payments, corporate incentives and security spending over healthcare and public education, represent a growing rebellion of a major section of workers against the “left” ruling party, Morena.

War and dictatorship

There is a growing sense across Latin America as well that war and dictatorship are on the doorstep. The Trump administration invaded Venezuela in January and has threatened to invade Mexico, Panama and Cuba, while maintaining the largest military deployment in the region in decades.

In this context, the US government is pressuring countries to militarize ostensibly against transnational crime, specifically asking Latin American countries last June to raise military spending to 3.5 percent of GDP. Argentina and Peru are spending billions on F-16s, while security spending is rapidly increasing across the region, both in preparation for mass repression at home and involvement in wars abroad.

According to the *New York Times* on October 14, a 600-soldier battalion of the 10th Mountain Division is deploying to Panama, Colombia and Honduras, Reaper drones have been moved to Colombia and Ecuador, and the Pentagon plans to move from strikes on boats, which have killed at least 239 people, to strikes on land.

Gen. Joseph Ryan, head of the Army’s Western Hemisphere Command, explained the aim: “We have ceded economic dominance in the region to an adversary, and that is a fact. We are fighting now to retake terrain—maritime and land, human terrain, cognitive terrain.” The adversary is China. The “terrain,” presented as another theater of the emerging Third World War, is Latin America.

With the threat of nuclear catastrophe growing as NATO and Russia, as well as the US and China, come closer to a direct conflict, the question is whether this generation will have any future at all.

Beyond military repercussions, Trump has repeatedly made economic threats if his picked candidates did not win. “If he loses, we are not going to be generous with Argentina,” he said of Milei before last year’s midterms, with a \$40 billion bailout at stake. In Honduras, he warned that if Nasry Asfura lost, “the United States will not be throwing good money after bad,” and pardoned the convicted cocaine trafficker and former president Juan Orlando Hernández. After Kast’s victory, he boasted, “The person I backed in Chile, who wasn’t leading, ended up winning quite easily.” He gave de la Espriella his “complete and total endorsement,” and imposed 50 percent tariffs on Brazil over the prosecution and jailing of Jair Bolsonaro for his coup plot. Flávio Bolsonaro, who met Trump ahead of the elections, promises to pardon his father and to impeach Supreme Court justices.

The case of Fernando Cerimedo has exposed broader US interference. The Argentine consultant, a business partner of Trump’s former campaign manager Brad Parscale, ran digital operations for Bolsonaro and Milei, advised Asfura and served as Paz’s top adviser. Peruvian outlets report that his network worked in support of Fujimori. In Chile, he admitted working against the 2022 draft constitution, and former Colombian

President Gustavo Petro accuses him of running two million bot accounts to elect de la Espriella. Cerimedo was jailed in Bolivia in August, accused of ordering the murder of his former partner. When Bolivia’s attorney general pursued the case, the State Department revoked his visa, and Paz’s police arrested him two days later.

Who opened the door to the far right?

But what else is to be expected from imperialism? Washington has organized coups and invasions in Latin America for more than a century. The conclusion is not that the region is defenseless before the whims of Uncle Sam. Political responsibility for enabling unpopular right-wing forces to seize and retain power while workers move to the left must be sought elsewhere. No bot farm produced the collapse of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) in Bolivia, which kept the capitalist state intact through two decades in power and left behind a fuel and dollar crisis. No bot farm produced Gabriel Boric’s broken promises in Chile, or Pedro Castillo’s capitulation and Dina Boluarte’s massacres in Peru. The far right fed on the disillusionment these governments produced.

The pink tide also prepared the ground politically. Faced with crime fed by poverty, informality and the US-bound drug trade, the entire political establishment, the nominal left included, adopted police state programs. Honduras’s Libre government of Xiomara Castro imposed a state of exception against gangs in December 2022 and kept extending it. Boric signed the Naín-Retamal law, widening the police’s license to kill, and kept the Mapuche south under military occupation. Sheinbaum completed the transfer of the National Guard to army command and handed dozens of accused cartel figures to Washington. Lula campaigns on “prison for the criminal.”

Once the “left” accepted that poor neighborhoods are a problem for soldiers and prisons, while abandoning any significant social reforms, the field was open to those who promised to go further. Nayib Bukele has ruled El Salvador under a state of exception since March 2022, jailing more than 85,000 people without due process, and his megaprison has become the model for the far right. Flávio Bolsonaro promises a “Milei-Bukele model.” De la Espriella and Kast campaigned on mass imprisonment. Costa Rica opened its own Bukele-style megaprison last week. The apparatus built against “crime” is now turned against the working class: a script has been agreed upon regionally to brand protesters and strikers “narco-terrorists.”

Faced with Washington’s intervention, the pink tide leaders have accommodated Trump and appealed to the UN and the armed forces themselves for support, being unable and unwilling to make any genuine appeal to the working class.

The union bureaucracies and the pseudo-left have done the rest. In June, the leadership of the Bolivian Workers Center (COB) called off a 51-day general strike and uprising, in which police and soldiers killed at least four protesters. They signed a “pacification” agreement with Paz, and the next day, a decree authorized the army to clear highways.

In Argentina, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) has reached an understanding with Milei that secures the privileges of the bureaucracy, while diverting anger behind the promise of a “national and popular government” in 2027. The entire political establishment, moreover, has adopted Milei’s nationalist campaign around retaking the Malvinas.

The pseudo-left lends this nationalism a radical cover. The Socialist Workers Party (PTS) and the Workers Party (PO) of Argentina criticize the CGT’s inaction while accepting its framework of “sovereignty” and national industry, and never appealing to the workers in Brazil, Chile or the United States employed by the same corporations. In Brazil, the

Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL) and the Morenito groups campaign for Lula as the “lesser evil.” All of it to prepare workers to follow the next bourgeois nationalist into the same trap.

The lessons of Chile

Petro, Lula, Sheinbaum and Boric regularly invoke the example of Chilean President Salvador Allende, who died during the September 11, 1973 coup. They present him as a martyr to imperialism.

The imperialist conspiracy against Allende’s Popular Unity government was real. In September 1970, Richard Nixon ordered the CIA to “make the economy scream.” The agency spent \$8 million on destabilization between 1970 and 1973, financing the newspaper *El Mercurio* and the truckers’ and employers’ strikes, while ITT offered money to block Allende’s inauguration.

But the Chilean working class was far stronger than its enemies. In 1972 and 1973, workers built the *cordones industriales*, networks of workers’ committees that organized production, supply and defense in Santiago’s industrial belts. The working class, however, was politically disarmed by its leadership. After a failed tank assault on the presidential palace in June 1973, Communist Party leader Luis Corvalán declared, “We continue to support the absolutely professional character of the armed institutions.” Allende brought generals into the cabinet and in August 1973 named Augusto Pinochet commander of the army. Fidel Castro toured Chile for more than three weeks in 1971, lending his left credentials to the Popular Unity government.

The decisive role, however, was played by Pabloism, the revisionist tendency that broke with Trotskyism in the 1950s by insisting that Stalinist and nationalist forces could lead the revolution. In 1965, the Chilean Trotskyist cadre in the Revolutionary Workers Party (POR) were liquidated into the Castroite Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR), which gave “critical support” to Allende and in March 1973 withdrew its electoral opposition to the Popular Unity government. As the International Committee wrote on September 18, 1973, “the Trotskyist party was destroyed in Chile, not by Stalinism or any junta,” but by the revisionists who “substituted for it the ideas and methods of Guevara and Castro.”

The CIA’s years of preparation for the coup and for a regime of fascist terror succeeded only because the Chilean working class had no independent revolutionary leadership to help it break with capitalist politics and take power. And this happened at the height of a global revolutionary upsurge. Since the May-June 1968 general strike in France, hundreds of millions had risen up across the world, from the *Cordobazo* in Argentina to Italy’s “Hot Autumn” and the struggles that would bring down the dictatorships in Portugal and Greece within a year of the Chilean coup.

In every case, the Stalinist, social democratic and Pabloite leaderships worked to keep these movements within the framework of capitalism, and the Chilean working class paid the price. Some 3,000 people were killed or disappeared under the dictatorship that followed, and tens of thousands were tortured. The military juntas organized Operation Condor with CIA backing to coordinate repression across the region.

The way forward

The working class of Latin America is far larger and more powerful than in 1973. The copper miners of Antofagasta, the autoworkers of Puebla and

Bahia, the truck drivers who cross the US-Mexican border and the health workers of the IMSS are links in a single system of globalized production. Their most powerful allies are not the national capitalist parties or bureaucracies that present themselves as more pro-worker or left, but the workers of the United States and internationally who face the same enemy. The administration sending troops into the hemisphere is building the apparatus of dictatorship at home.

The shipwreck of the Pink Tide—the latest in a long history of abortive bourgeois nationalist projects in the region—has confirmed once again the fundamental tenets of Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution. This perspective established that, in the epoch of imperialism, the national bourgeoisie in Latin America and other oppressed countries is organically incapable of waging a consistent struggle against imperialism or completing fundamental democratic tasks because of its dependence on imperialism and its fear of the working class.

These tasks fall to working class of the Americas, North and South, which must unite their struggles by building rank-and-file committees in every workplace, independent of the union bureaucracies and every capitalist party. These must be linked internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Above all, the radical change that workers and youth strive for must become a conscious and historically informed program. This requires building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International across Latin America, to arm this movement with the program of permanent revolution and the struggle for world socialism.



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