Costa Rica: Thousands of teachers join national strike as fascistic president declares it illegal

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Thousands of public school teachers, university staff, retirees and students struck across Costa Rica on Wednesday. They marched through downtown San José against the government's 2027 budget, which cuts education spending to its lowest share of national output since 2007. Teachers from every province marched to the Plaza de la Democracia, in front of the Legislative Assembly, chanting "¡Fuera Laura!"

President Laura Fernández, a close ally of the Trump administration, answered with threats and insults. At her afternoon press conference she declared: "This strike is absolutely illegal, and we are going to dock the day's pay of the vagrants who go along with demanding things that don't exist." She insisted, "We are fulfilling our obligations to you in everything, educators."

Education Minister Leonardo Sánchez said the Attorney General's Office would ask a labor court to declare the strike illegal within 24 hours. The unions, he said, had to prove "a social and economic impact on the employees, and that is nowhere to be seen." Demanding the constitutional 8 percent of GDP for education was "populism in its maximum expression," he added. "I think they believe money grows on trees." Asked whether the budget would hurt schools, he answered: "An impact? Not in the slightest."

The strike was called by the National Association of Educators (ANDE), the Association of Secondary School Teachers (APSE) and the Union of Education Workers (SEC), joined by the public universities. The demands are modest: a path toward the 8 percent of GDP required by Article 78 of the Constitution, cost-of-living raises for active teachers, unfreezing teachers' pensions and payment of the state's debt to the teachers' pension fund.

According to *CRHoy*, Wednesday's strike was the 17th protest against government policies since Fernández took office in May, involving education workers, students, transport workers, pensioners and farmers. Police had already detained students at her inauguration and during protests at the National University (UNA).

The talk of "vagrants" and the rush to the courts express the ruling class's turn to open repression against a growing movement of workers and youth, as it loads a deepening economic crisis onto the working class.

Unemployment rose to 6.5 percent in the third quarter, the first statistically significant rise in five years, and more than 6,000 jobs have been lost as multinationals close plants.

But the weapons now aimed at the teachers and students were not forged by Fernández. They were built by the parties now posing as the opposition and made possible by union bureaucracies that betrayed every major struggle of the past decade. Defending public education requires a break with all of them.

Fabián Nájera, a teacher in Desamparados with 25 years of service, marched despite a condition that makes walking difficult. "I feel outraged and disrespected by the President," he told *CR Hoy*. His annual step increase has gone unpaid since March, and a promised raise never arrived. He described teachers buying supplies with their own money, feeding students who arrive hungry and holding bingos to raise funds for their schools.

According to the Comptroller General's (CGR) report on the budget, the Ministry of Public Education will receive ?19.23 billion ($42 million) less in 2027 than this year, bringing its budget to 4.9 percent of GDP, the lowest share since 2007. The Executive's draft cut the Avancemos grants, which keep poor teenagers in secondary school, by 10.2 percent, even though 33,893 eligible students were still waiting to enroll in August.

The school infrastructure department says it needs ?51.18 billion ($112 million) next year but will receive ?29.85 billion ($65 million). In June, the Ombudsman's Office reported that 389 schools had begun the year under active sanitary orders with no repair project assigned. Another 101 schools were in the "red" category, meaning "imminent risk of total closure," with pests, collapsing roofs and exposed wiring.

Public-sector workers have received no cost-of-living raise since July 2019. About 46,000 retired teachers have had their pensions frozen for more than five years. When a bill to unfreeze them came up in March 2025, Pilar Cisneros, then the ruling party's leader in the Assembly, said the retirees "are not dying of hunger." On the eve of the strike, the ruling Sovereign People's Party (PPSO) approved another ?8.05 billion ($17.6 million) cut to the public universities.

The money exists to fully fund education. The CGR projects interest payments on the public debt of ?2.7 trillion ($5.9 billion) in 2027, or 4.9 percent of GDP, the same share allotted to the entire public education system.

Fernández, who took office on May 8 as the political heir of Rodrigo Chaves, now her finance minister, has accused the Constitutional Chamber of a "coup d'état" and said US ground

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operations on Costa Rican soil "would obviously be very good for national security." In October, her party filed a sedition complaint against former Broad Front deputy Ariel Robles for urging students to camp outside the Assembly "as is happening in France and Spain." The ruling class treats the comparison itself as a crime.

Who built the anti-strike law

The legal basis for declaring Wednesday's strike illegal, however, is Law 9808, passed 35 to 13 on January 16, 2020, and signed four days later by President Carlos Alvarado of the Citizens' Action Party (PAC). The law bans "political" strikes and strikes in essential services, suspends the wages of strikers, sets fast-track procedures for declaring strikes illegal and permits strikes against government policy only when workers can prove a direct impact on their economic interests. This is the clause the government is now invoking. Most deputies of National Liberation (PLN), the party that built the free trade zone regime and carried out decades of IMF austerity, voted in favor.

The Broad Front (Frente Amplio) was inside that government. Its president, Patricia Mora, served as Alvarado's Minister for the Status of Women from May 2018 to December 2020, after endorsing most of the PAC's "National Unity" pact with the right-wing Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC). In September 2018, as the strike against the fiscal reform began, Alvarado asked Mora, a former member of the Stalinist People's Vanguard and niece of its founder Manuel Mora, to help with the "dialogue" with the unions. She stayed through the fiscal reform, the end of the 89-day strike and the anti-strike law, resigning only when Alvarado went to the IMF.

In last February's elections, the pseudo-left Broad Front ran in a de facto bloc with the PLN and the remnants of the PAC, clearing the way for Fernández. On Wednesday, deputies of both the PLN and the Broad Front came out to greet the marchers.

The unions' record

The 89-day strike of 2018, the longest in the country's history, was not defeated by the government. A labor court declared it illegal on October 9, and the unions used the ruling to pressure workers back. As late as November 29, 97 percent of members of the APSE voted to continue the strike. ANDE, APSE and the SEC ended it anyway after backroom talks, telling teachers there was "nothing left to fight for."

The fiscal reform's spending rule, which bars cost-of-living raises whenever the debt exceeds 60 percent of GDP, is the source of today's wage and pension freeze, and the CGR expects it to bind until at least 2033. Law 9808 followed.

After classrooms reopened in February 2021 with teachers unvaccinated, hundreds died. The unions called a single "virtual" stoppage, and the ministry used Law 9808 to dock the pay of the 1,354 teachers who joined it.

Then came Alvarado's 2022 Public Employment Law, with the two-tier "global salary" teachers now protest. The unions answered each attack with one-day marches.

An international movement

The strike in San José coincided with a 24-hour general strike in Spain against soaring housing costs and falling living standards, following mass protests in France, Italy, Belgium, Greece and Portugal. Recent weeks have also seen national strikes and mass marches in Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina and Chile. As the WSWS European Editorial Board wrote on the Spanish strike:

> The ICFI insists that the era of socialist revolution opened by the October 1917 revolution has not ended. Against all those who claim that capitalist governments and the union bureaucracies can be pressured into granting the demands of workers, it fights to build a political movement in the working class to transfer power to the workers and build socialism.

A government that spends as much on bondholders as on its schools will not fund public education because of a one-day march, least of all when the official opposition stands behind the same debt payment regime and the laws that enforce it. Teachers need rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and every establishment party, to unite with health workers, free trade zone workers and students, and with workers across the Americas and Europe through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We urge teachers and workers who agree with this perspective to contact the WSWS and take up the fight to build a Costa Rican section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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