National strike in Colombia: Pacto Histórico and the unions struggle to contain opposition to De la Espriella

Andrea Lobo
20 November 2026

Teachers, students, public employees and retirees marched in Bogotá, Cali, Medellín, Barranquilla and dozens of other cities on Thursday in a national strike against the "Economic Rescue Law" of Colombia's fascistic President Abelardo de la Espriella.

The government, which has every reason to minimize the turnout, counted 285 actions and some 55,000 participants. An 80-year-old marcher, Blasco Vallejo, carried a sign reading, "100 days of authoritarianism, where the real miracle will be making it to the end of the month." His pension bonus of 150,000 pesos, about $45, has not arrived in five months.

Riot police fired tear gas and stun grenades at marches in Bogotá, Cali, Barranquilla and Cajibío. They stormed the National University in Bogotá and the University of Cauca in Popayán, and Medellín's mayor sent police into the University of Antioquia. De la Espriella boasted of 12 police "interventions" and declared that Decree 1525, which lets police skip the steps of dialogue before using force against protesters, "is working."

The strike is part of a global upsurge of the working class. Across the hemisphere, ruling elites under pressure from US imperialism are remaking their economies and political systems to meet its demands: alignment against China, preparation for war, cheap raw materials and labor, austerity and guaranteed returns for financial speculators. But the action remained politically dominated by the left nationalist coalition Pacto Histórico, which governed Colombia for the first time under Gustavo Petro and opened the door to De la Espriella. The union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left are channeling workers' anger back behind it and into appeals to Congress.

The objective significance of the struggle being waged by workers and youth must be made conscious. It requires a turn to the decisive sections of the working class that have not yet joined it, and a strategy independent of every faction of the ruling class and international in scope.

A "miracle" for investors

The Rescue Law, filed on October 29, cuts public spending by about 45 trillion pesos, 2.2 percent of GDP.

The Finance Ministry projects savings of 44.6 trillion pesos (US$13 billion) in 2027 and 76.1 trillion by 2030, with 105 state entities eliminated or merged, and public assets and shareholdings identified for sale. The corporate income tax would fall from 35 percent to 31 percent, while the income tax threshold would drop so that workers earning 5 to 5.5 million pesos a month, down from about 9 million today, would begin paying.

The weekly *Cambio* called it the largest tax reform in Colombia's history and a regressive one. De la Espriella retreated this week on a plan to raise the sales tax on basic foods. Two days before the strike, the Education Ministry announced a cut of 386 billion pesos (about $US115 million) to its investment budget.

De la Espriella's draft National Development Plan, titled "Colombia, the miracle homeland," sets out the longer-term program. It offers new mega-investors in mining, infrastructure and agribusiness a 20 percent income tax rate, guaranteed for 16 years. It pledges "responsible fracking," a return to 1 million barrels of oil a day by 2030 and the rewriting of environmental laws to speed up extraction. Education, moreover, would be reorganized on biblical lines against "gender ideology."

The International Monetary Fund hailed the Rescue Law as "an important step in the right direction." It warned that without it, Colombia "could ultimately face a disorderly adjustment through financial markets with serious social and economic implications." That is a threat. Petro left a deficit his own government projected at 4.5 percent of GDP for 2027, which the new administration has raised to 7.2 percent, and the bondholders intend to collect.

Finance capital chose its candidate early. After De la

© World Socialist Web Site

Espriella won the May 31 first round against Petro's heir, Senator Iván Cepeda, the peso posted its largest one-day gain in four years. By the runoff, it had risen 7.1 percent, and yields on 10-year government bonds had fallen 150 basis points. Trump repeatedly endorsed De la Espriella. In the June 21 runoff, the closest in Colombia's history, he won 12,960,166 votes to Cepeda's 12,708,312.

That a lawyer with no political record, who had called leftists a "mangy plague" to be treated "not as adversaries, but as enemies," could displace even the traditional far-right, the Uribista Centro Democrático, is a product of the Petro government. Elected in 2022 on promises of "change," Petro made no inroads against the landowning, financial and corporate oligarchy. His "total peace" collapsed, his land reform stalled and his government strengthened the military and police. Faced with Trump's threats, he capitulated at every stage.

In January 2025 he reversed within hours his refusal of US military deportation flights. On February 3, 2026, a month after the US raid on Caracas, he sat in the Oval Office and handed Trump a list of drug traffickers. Trump remarked that Petro had become "very nice" after the raid. Petro is now embroiled in allegations that he traded public contracts for sex, which he denies.

The Pacto Histórico's leaders know what is being prepared. On the eve of the strike, Cepeda told *El País* that "a kind of criminal apparatus" tied to drug trafficking and paramilitarism "is taking over the Colombian state," carrying out a "counter-agrarian reform" that hands land back to drug traffickers, former paramilitaries and mining and energy interests. He described the government as "an extreme right that I do not hesitate to call fascist" and warned that, under its Anti-Terrorist Statute, "we could end up with thousands of citizens and social organizations" branded as terrorists.

In the same interview, he declared that the Pacto Histórico has "always" been willing to seek common ground in Congress with Uribe's Centro Democrático, and is even "prepared for a dialogue with the government itself, with Mr. De la Espriella himself." Faced with what he calls fascism, he offers to play "the role the law grants me."

The events recall Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where Colonel Aureliano Buendía leads 32 Liberal uprisings and loses them all. When the party's lawyers ask him to give up the revision of land titles to win over the Liberal landowners, he concedes and concludes that they are now fighting only for power, ends the war and retreats to making little gold fish that he melts and makes again. The striking banana workers are summoned to the railway station to await the provincial authorities and are machine-gunned by the army. The episode is based on the real massacre of United Fruit workers at Ciénaga in 1928. García Márquez saw only an endless cycle, but such fatalism was rooted in his rejection of Marxism and the revolutionary historical role of the working class.

Petro and the CUT labor federation framed Thursday's strike as pressure on Congress. "Mr. Abelardo's bills are bills of hunger and poverty, and that is why the people must take to the streets en masse," Petro declared.

CUT leader Fabio Arias predicted marches "much more massive than in October." According to *El País*, the strike instead closely resembled the October 14 protests, drawing largely on the same base without new participants. The marches were made up overwhelmingly of teachers, students, public employees and retirees. Workers in oil, mining, the ports, transport and manufacturing have not been mobilized.

This is no accident. On October 1, 11 of the 21 members of the CUT executive formed a new majority aligning with the government, and the CGT federation refused to march. Cepeda now speaks of preparing a general strike to stop the tax reform. But a general strike called by these forces would be used to pressure Congress and to rehabilitate the Pacto Histórico, the same political formation that left the country to De la Espriella and the IMF.

The elections showed that Colombian workers do not face only the local oligarchy. They face Wall Street, the IMF and the Pentagon, which lined up behind the far right. The same forces are dictating terms across the region. In Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's reelected government is pushing a fiscal adjustment bill through the Senate, and students marched against it in 13 cities on November 17. In Mexico, health workers and truckers have rebelled against the nominally left Sheinbaum government.

Workers in Colombia must draw the lessons of the Petro years. Their fight is against global finance and imperialism, and it can be waged only by uniting with workers across the Americas and internationally. That requires building rank-and-file committees in every workplace, independent of the union bureaucracies and linked through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, and building a revolutionary socialist leadership, the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site