

Colombia: Solidarity with the mass uprising

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Colombia's far right president, Iván Duque, lit the fuse of an uprising by working-class and middle class Colombians with a proposed tax increase, raising \$8bn ostensibly to pay down the country's debt, calculated by the IMF as between 43 (net) and 49 (gross) percent of the country's GDP. The Tax reform Bill, sent to Congress on April 15, included a rise in Value Added Tax, VAT, of 19 percent on basic services such as electricity, gas, Internet, water and sanitation but also, bizarrely, on funeral services.

In addition, an increase in the price of gasoline was announced and every worker earning more than twice the minimum wage would start paying income tax. The middle class, too, would be hard hit with tax increases of 300 to 500 percent, facing many small businesses with ruin.

Corruption, inequality, poverty, brutal state repression: all four have been the catalysts behind the explosion of a mass movement. All four have been intensified and made worse by the coronavirus pandemic, the onset of which, and the nationwide lockdown that followed, defused the country's 2019 general strike against Duque's previous tax reforms. Thus, Duque's second raid on the people's desperately low incomes proved to be the last straw. Unemployment was already 19 percent; four million in a nation of 50 million.

The response of the masses was immediate. The union federations the Central Union of Workers, CUT, the Confederation of Colombian Workers, CTC, and the General Federation of Labor, CGT, called a general strike for Wednesday 28 April, despite a court ruling banning demonstrations on that day and on May 1. Though union membership itself is only 4 per cent of the workforce, 850,000 members, the popular response to the unions' call was massive.

Yet Duque, undeterred, unleashed violent repression on the demonstrators, particularly the notorious Mobile Anti-Disturbances Squadron, ESMAD. This was formed in 1999 under President Andrés Pastrana, during the war with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC, and the National Liberation Army, ELN. Since its formation, not a year has gone by when ESMAD was not involved in violence against popular organizations. In 2013, its operatives impaled a farmer during a peasant's strike. But this time repression did not work.

The unions decided to maintain the protests throughout the country and on May Day, workers, students, indigenous people, precarious workers and the unemployed took to the streets of the main cities of the country once more. And once more the police unleashed stun grenades, water cannon and rubber bullets on them, with the result that during the whole five days of confrontation, according to the Ministry of Defense itself, 19 people were killed, 846 injured and 431 people detained by the police. Duque also deployed tanks on the streets and even used Black Hawk helicopters.

Then, on May 2, unable to quell the uprising, Duque withdrew the tax reform bill and Alberto Carrasquilla, the economics minister, resigned. Despite this, protests continued with the next highpoint being May 5.

Demonstrators filled the streets of Bogotá and lorry drivers blocking arterial roads between major cities. Far right armed squads attacked indigenous protesters in Cali, the country's third largest city, and tried to break the blockades. By May 7, 26 protesters were dead, and 90 people were "disappeared".

The government's response to protesters was one of carrot as well as stick, a small carrot and a big stick. On the one hand, Duque called for a national dialogue whilst at the same time he called the demonstrators terrorists and threatened to declare a state of civil unrest, a form of martial law. Sandra Borda, a columnist for the Colombian newspaper El Tiempo, in an interview with the New York Times, put it succinctly: "People cannot sit down to dialogue with a government that by night kills people who protest and by day extends a hand in conversation."

Former president and godfather of the right, Alvaro Uribe, who had criticized the tax hikes, has been tweeting calls for a full scale military intervention, that is, a coup d'état. But no one has forgotten that it was Uribe, who served two terms as president and is the head of a corrupt mafia-like political clique, who oversaw massive abuses and killings, committed by ESMAD and the military. The decades long war with the FARC and the ELN ended five years ago, when Uribe finally negotiated a ceasefire agreement. In fact, the war by government forces and right wing death squads against the organizations of workers, peasants and indigenous communities has never really ended. Over a thousand of their leaders have been assassinated since the peace deal.

Uribe's dissatisfaction with Duque is that his austerity policies and repression make it more and more certain that the right wing candidate will lose next year's election to former 1980s M-19 guerrilla Gustavo Petro, now a senator and leader of Colombia Humana, a leftish social democratic party. His support, according to opinion polls, has surged from 25.9 percent in August last year to 38.3 percent this April.

The spontaneous mass movement on the streets involves the rank and file of the unions, young workers in precarious jobs, students, the unemployed, indigenous people's collectives, peasants and progressive sections of the middle class. But the movement faces a crisis of leadership. The leaders of the CUT and CGT, in the National Strike Committee, have tried to restrict action by workers to one-day work stoppages, hoping thereby to force an acceptable concession from the government. They hope to see Petro win next year's presidential election, rather than risk calling an all-out indefinite general strike to bring down the government.

Plainly, nothing will come of negotiations that leave the Duque and Uribe mafia and the generals in power. Duque's government is teetering on the verge of collapse and Colombia is plainly in a revolutionary situation, one that poses the alternative: revolution or counterrevolution. But no movement can be prolonged indefinitely and exhaustion by the masses could set in, opening the way to a military coup. Therefore, the movement needs to adopt the goal of overthrowing Duque and the whole ruling class that has robbed ordinary Colombians for so long.

This would require the formation of councils of delegates from all the workers' and popular organizations at grass roots level. They would need to be armed for their own security. At the same time, it means the creation of a party, which can lead the fight for a workers' and peasants' government. In this revolution, the brutal apparatus of repression needs to be broken up by winning the rank and file soldiers to the side of the people. In short, the workers, peasants and youth need to take control of the country.

The role of US Imperialism

The United States shares long term responsibility for Colombia's repeated economic crises and wars. Plan Colombia, agreed by President Andrés Pastrana with US President Bill Clinton in 1999, was

ostensibly to put a stop to the drugs trade but, in reality, to help the government to win its long conflict with the FARC. Thus, it centered on strengthening the Colombian military. Black Hawk helicopters and other military equipment were transferred to Colombia's security forces. In the course of the drugs eradication programs, farmers and whole villages suffered murderous attacks. The military and its associated death squads used US largesse to wage a dirty war against peasant organizations and trade unions on behalf of the country's utterly corrupt elite. Its effect was to greatly worsen the inequality and poverty already rampant in the country.

The Colombia military have long been a tool of US imperialism's domination of the region and its political élite is heavily beholden to their masters in the North. This has been true under US presidents Democratic and Republican alike; Clinton, Bush, Obama and Trump all using the pretext of the "war on drugs". Under Plan Colombia, between 2000 and 2014, American soldiers provided military training, intelligence support and tactical support during operations against the FARC and the ELN. US Special Forces use Colombian military bases to direct destabilization measures, as in Venezuela, or outright coups, as in Bolivia.

Will this change under the new president? Not if it is left to him and the country's political, economic and military élite, that's for sure. Joe Biden was a key figure in steering Plan Colombia through the US Senate and later, as Obama's vice president, was a staunch advocate of the militarization of the Colombian police. There are also important US investments in the region, which is home to oil pipelines owned by US companies.

The White House and the Congress were perfectly aware that the Colombian government used this equipment to massacre thousands of civilians and target indigenous communities. Recently, it was revealed that a US military official was present at the El Mozote Massacre in El Salvador. Obama's coup in Honduras has also brought about the deaths of indigenous Mayans at the hands of US-trained and advised Honduran police and soldiers. As always, the US has sought to boost the profits of its banks and corporations throughout Latin America, via increased privatization and the increased presence of US companies within the region, fighting Chinese and EU rivals.

The repression during the present wave of protests has drawn condemnation from the United Nations, the European Union and human rights groups such as Amnesty International. In Congress, too, some Democratic senators have now criticized the police repression in Colombia. It seems that Duque and his cronies are in a panic for fear they will not receive the usual wholehearted support they expect from Washington. Certainly, we should not rely on this, but it indicates that if in the US we campaign strongly, this will aid the movement in the country.

Solidarity

The repression is one with many parallels within the United States. We have witnessed police killings first hand, when we marched for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and as we march for Andrew Brown, Daunte Wright and Adam Toledo. We also have experienced brutal policies enacted by drug enforcement agencies at home. Thousands of people of color populate the nation's jails due to the War on Drugs. We have also seen an increased militarization of our own police forces as heavy-duty armored vehicles and weaponry from Afghanistan are brought back and given to the police.

Demonstrators in Colombia need the support of their class brothers and sisters in the "Belly of the Beast", US imperialism. That is why we must demonstrate in front of Colombian consulates and embassies just as we march against our own police brutality, thereby showing that our common enemy is US imperialism. Unions and the Democratic Socialists of America should fight for an immediate halt to all US financial and logistical aid to the Colombian military. We should do all we can to impose it by workers' sanctions

wherever possible.

A similar show of solidarity is vital from countries right across South and Central America. All the countries here have seen their economies? GDP decrease by at least seven per cent and unemployment has spiked. In Brazil, we have been suffering the authoritarian rule of Jair Bolsonaro, whose criminal policies, such as blocking serious measures against Covid by federal state governments, have resulted in a huge death toll. The situation has worsened in 2021 amid the spread of P.1, the Brazilian variant, which has torn through populations, adding to the increasing daily death rates.

Bolsonaro has been openly encouraging the military to undertake a coup to avoid defeat in the next presidential elections. This shows not only how much we need international class solidarity but how rapidly revolutionary situations can develop in any country in our region, posing the same issues, including a common strategy for working class power and an international revolutionary party to fight for it.

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