

Half a million students strike over education law in Colombia

By Luis Arce
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Tens of thousands of students took to the streets of Colombia's major cities again Wednesday to demand the rescinding of a proposed reform of legislation governing university education, known as Law 30, that was passed in 1992. The demonstrators charge that the so-called reform would benefit the country's wealthiest at the expense of the majority of Colombian youth.

The marches, which were largest in Bogota, Cali and Medellin, came in the midst of a continuing indefinite strike by some half a million public university students. It was the third round of these demonstrations, which have seen hundreds of thousands of students, workers, professors and parents protesting against the policies of the US-backed government of President Juan Manuel Santos.

The reform of the higher education law is intimately bound up with the Free Trade Agreement between the US and Colombia that President Barack Obama signed into law on October 21. The aim of both initiatives is to open up Colombia even more to foreign capital and to the economic and military influence of Washington, which has poured some \$7 billion of military aid into the country since 2000, making it the largest recipient of such funding outside the Middle East.

This aid has been justified in the name of the "war on drugs" and combating guerrillas. But, as the mass demonstrations show, it has been used to prop up an oppressive government and a profoundly socially unequal capitalist system in Colombia.

While Wednesday's protests were largely peaceful, the biggest demonstrations thus far, on October 12, saw sharp clashes with riot police, who attacked the students with clubs and tear gas. Dozens of youth and five police were reported injured, while 22 students were arrested.

In Cali, a medical student, Gian Farid Shang Lugo, was killed by the explosion of a homemade bomb.

Colombia's Federation of University Students (FEU) reported that a "device which unknown persons threw from a bridge exploded waist high by our comrade, brother and friend...destroying his right leg and the lower part of his abdomen, causing his immediate death, and wounding 10 others in the arms and faces as a result of shrapnel."

Referring to a video released by the Colombian media, the FEU declared:

"One sees in the video recorded by channel *Noti5* the students statements and testimony, but at the same time, this channel lied, editing the interview and disrespecting the memory of the murdered student. The commentary on YouTube indicates the depths of the media manipulation. The students denounce the position of *Noti5*, when it says [in its headline], 'Student dead from handling *papa bomba* [homemade bomb].'"

The FEU has charged the media with covering up the role of the government in the repression and accuses undercover agents of infiltrating the demonstration and throwing the bomb, murdering the student. Colombia's secret police agency, the DAS or Administrative Security Department, has been implicated in assassinations and other crimes, sometimes blaming its own actions on leftist guerrillas.

The indefinite general strike, called by the Mesa Amplia Nacional Estudiantil (National Broad Student Council, or MANE), which unites the country's student organizations, has continued for more than two weeks, shutting down 45 public universities. Seven of them began the strike a month ago.

According to a student spokesman, the proposed law threatens to "degrade the quality of education at the public universities, cut the budget and increase tuition." Moreover, if the government now claims that it is abandoning its proposals for privatizations and education for profit, this may only be a maneuver to lull the students into abandoning their strike.

Despite its subservience to the government, a survey of the Colombian press gives a sense of the scope of the student mobilization, as well as the police violence.

- In Bogota, members of the Mobile Anti-riot Squad (ESMAD) of the National police attacked a group of students at the University of Rosario.

- In Antioquia, students are continuing to firmly support the position they took a month ago, when on September 14 the General Assembly of Students called the strike.

- In Cartagena, a Torchlight March was organized. The Cartagena students issued a statement warning that the government's "proposal is heading toward the privatization of public education, as it continues to be deficient in funding."

- In Barranquilla, the October 12 march brought out thousands of students from the University of the Atlantic. The youth of the city stated that "the children of the poor will not have access to the public university" because the tuition will rise to the level that exists in private universities today.

- In Cucuta and Cali, there have been a series of confrontations with police since the beginning of September. The mobilizations have included both the professors and students of the University of the Valley. More than 15,000 students, peasants, teachers, families and workers, among others, took to the streets in the Cauca Valley.

- In Sucre, the students have occupied the grounds of the University of Sucre, where they have set up tents and improvised a field kitchen. They have carried out a series of demonstrations—among them, night marches and lying down in highways of the city, blocking traffic.

- The student protests have won the sympathy of a broad layer of

the Colombian population. They have been supported by the Colombian Federation of Educators (FECODE), the United Workers Central of Colombia (CUT) and the students of the private universities, organized in the FEU-UNIVERSIDADES PRIVADAS.

Defending the right to “access to knowledge and science, to learn, to discuss, to propose and build from the academy a different society,” the private university students declared that “the drive for profit implicitly remains in the new law, which in no way offers guarantees for access to our universities, outside of prolonged indebtedness.” The law, they added, would render “the possibilities of there existing a true democracy, autonomy and welfare will be even more distant in these universities.”

In contrast to the broad support for the student demonstrations, the government has taken a position of fierce and intransigent opposition. Learning from the Chilean government’s handling of the student upheavals in that country, its calls for dialogue serve only to gain time and prepare legal and violent attacks against the youth.

Quoting the minister of education, María Fernanda Campo, the daily *El Universal* of Bogotá reported, “After the frustrated attempts at dialogue between the national government and the students who reject the reform, the head of the ministry affirmed that she remains firm in her determination not to withdraw the proposal, considering that the country cannot renounce the benefits that it will bring.”

Among the most ominous themes sounded by the government is the charge that the student demonstrations have been “infiltrated” by the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrilla organization. On the eve of the massive October 12 marches, President Santos made a public statement, declaring, “We know very well that the strategy of the FARC will be to stimulate social protest and infiltrate this protest in order to produce violence, produce chaos. We ask the communities to help us, because this goes against everyone’s interests.”

This charge, which has been echoed by other government officials and the security forces, amounts to the criminalization of the student protests and a threat to unleash military force against them. In a country that has been under effective martial law for years and in which the “war on drugs” and counterinsurgency have produced massacres of peasants and workers, the determination of the students in defying these threats is evident.

The government claims to have complied with the requirement to consult the students, stating that thousands of youth were previously consulted. But, according to the FEU, *El Universal* reports, “of the 70,000 students who participated in the plebiscite on the draft reform of education, 97.9 percent said that they had at no time participated in the drafting of the initiative, and 94.74 percent said that they were not in agreement with it.” It is worth noting that more than 15,000 private university students also voted no on the reform.

The student organizations insist that the mass strike will continue until the government complies with their demands. Sergio Fernandez, spokesman for the Colombian Organization of Students (OCE), said that these include “Immediate withdrawal of the proposed law, giving guarantees for the drafting of an alternative proposal together with all sections of the universities, and guarantees for the exercising of democratic freedoms, which implies the demilitarization of the university campuses.”

Underlying the proposed reform of the 1992 Education Law 30 is the profound crisis of Colombian and international capitalism. The principal target of the coordinated attack of the banks and the governments that they control is the destruction of the living standards

and basic rights of the new generation all over the world.

This has given rise to the mobilization of young people internationally, from the *indignados* in Spain and other European countries, to the Occupy Wall Street protests that have spread across the US and internationally and to the more than five-month mobilization of secondary and university students in Chile. In every country, these movements are driven by anger over levels of social inequality that have risen sharply as a result of the world capitalist crisis.

The free trade pact signed between Obama and Santos will only deepen these conditions, opening up Colombia’s markets to US exports.

After being rejected by the US Congress for several years, the free trade agreement with Colombia has not been passed at the behest of the Obama administration—as part of a US strategy to use its closest ally in the region, Colombia, as a base for countering the growing competition it faces from China, Brazil and the European Union.

As elsewhere in the world, the advancement of the interests of the US banks and corporations goes hand in hand with military violence, in this case prosecuted under the banner of Plan Colombia, the sustained and massive US military aid program for the country’s security forces.

This US funding has helped Colombia sustain the highest military spending rate in the region, nearly 4 percent of the country’s gross domestic product, two times greater than Brazil and three times greater than Venezuela. Currently, the Colombian army has 230,000 troops, the same number as Brazil, which has seven times more territory and four times the population.

The sector that will be most hard hit by the Free Trade Agreement is agriculture, one of the most economically important for Colombia. Already, under the previous president, Álvaro Uribe, some 3 million peasants were forced off of some 6 million hectares of land.

Colombia is one of the most polarized societies in South America. It has 22 million people, some 47 percent of the population, living below the poverty line. More than 12 million live on less than \$2 a day. Since 2005, 2.5 million more Colombians fell below the poverty line, and some 3.2 million are classified as in “extreme poverty.”

As in the rest of the “emerging” countries of Latin America, the “informal” economy plays an important role in the super-exploitation of the Colombian worker. This sector is estimated to include some 60 percent of the workforce. There are only eight countries in the world with greater social inequality than Colombia.

The Free Trade Agreement will increase the exploitation of the Colombian worker; as with so-called labor reforms already implemented, employers will no longer have to pay for overtime. Health care and education will be further cut back, while military spending continues untouched, and the drive to privatize the universities will be intensified, despite the mass student mobilization.

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