

Honduras cracks down on teachers, doctors and students protesting privatization drive

By Andrea Lobo
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Since last Friday, Honduras has been rocked by growing strikes and demonstrations by teachers, health care workers, high-school and university students and their supporters against legislation that facilitates budget cuts, mass firings and the privatization of public education and the healthcare system.

The government of Juan Orlando Hernández (known as JOH) —a continuation of the regime installed by a US-backed coup in 2009— mobilized riot police to repress protesters with tear gas, rubber bullets and beatings. Dozens of demonstrators have been injured and at least 10 detained.

On Monday, when more than ten thousand workers and youth were marching in the capital, Tegucigalpa, a plainclothes police officer, identified as Jairo Alberto Flores López, was seen in videos speaking on a communication radio and shooting at demonstrators with a pistol while running next to riot police. One of the bullets hit the chest of José Humberto Duarte, a 54-year-old teacher, barely missing his vital organs.

The constant deadly attacks by the armed forces of the US puppet regime in Tegucigalpa against workers and youth struggling for their social and democratic rights exposes the farce of the “human rights” pretexts that US imperialism uses for its neo-colonial wars, invasions and regime-change operations across the world, most recently in its efforts to overthrow the Maduro government in Venezuela.

Teachers and doctors across Honduras struck on Monday and Tuesday and joined May Day demonstrations on Wednesday, a holiday. Their chants included “bring down the dictatorship” and “JOH leave.”

The protests in Honduras are part of a growing upsurge of the class struggle across the continent and internationally in opposition to social austerity and attacks on jobs, wages and benefits. Regionally, they follow the longest strike in Costa Rican history last year, also led by teachers, and mass protests against pension cuts in Nicaragua and student protests in March against water privatization in El Salvador.

María Dilia Paz, a teacher demonstrating in Tegucigalpa on Monday, described her conditions to *TeleSur*, “We do

everything we can to make ends meet. You know how the electrical service is, and if you are late one day they cut you off. Our children at times go with little food. They don’t get snacks because we don’t have any.”

The 65,000 teachers in the country get paid hourly wages at poverty levels—between \$2.70 and \$3.80 per hour of classes.

Thousands joined marches and roadblocks in other major cities, from the northern San Pedro Sula and La Ceiba, to Comayagua and Choluteca in the south. On Monday, protesters blocked the border with Nicaragua at Guasaule and were violently removed by Honduran police.

Three government buildings, including the city hall and a drug store, were set on fire on Monday in the capital, reportedly by demonstrators, and the headquarters of the ruling party was damaged on Wednesday.

Government officials and the corporate media have claimed that the structural reforms—composed of vague language about allowing the ministries to “revise the budget and yearly operating plan”—aim to “save” \$300 million that will be re-invested.

These reassurances, however, ring hollow for workers and youth who have witnessed years of cuts and deterioration in these vital public services as well as the outright stealing of funds by the ruling clique, including hundreds of millions of dollars taken from the healthcare system to finance JOH’s 2016 presidential campaign.

The General Workers Central (CGT), which is aligned with the regime, openly backed the measures, while the Trade Union of Public Education Employees and the Honduran Medical Association have opposed them on the basis of getting a seat at the table in further talks.

On Tuesday, National Party legislators announced that they would suspend the final ratification of the bills to continue the talks with the unions and opposition parties. In response, the trade unions and the doctors’ association called off further strikes.

Workers recognize that any negotiation with this puppet regime of the US and Honduran financial elites cannot result

in “the public services Hondurans deserve,” as union and government officials claim. Reports on the bills have been accompanied prominently in the media by news of ongoing meetings between the government and the International Monetary Fund since April 8, taking place both in Washington, DC and Tegucigalpa.

The media outlets have highlighted a rescue package involving the “restructuring” of the state electric company ENEE; however, the main goal of the talks with the IMF has been to receive new credits to cover the growing public debt in exchange for deeper austerity measures and privatizations.

On Tuesday, the advisor of the Honduran Council for Private Businesses (Cohep), Arturo Alvarado, a former finance minister, announced that a deal was close. “We got explanations that there will not be any tax increases,” he said, “what is coming relates to governance or how to improve the quality of expenditures, particularly in education and health care.”

All political parties and the trade unions represent the interests of capitalists whose profits depend on the ability of Honduras to attract foreign investments as a cheap labor platform with low or nonexistent taxes and social security costs.

The think-tank on external debt Fosdeh has calculated that debt servicing will exceed 45 billion lempiras (US\$1.85 billion) this year, surpassing the 39.6 billion lempiras (US\$1.6 billion) budget for health care, social security and education combined. This would mean a 33 percent increase in the disbursement to the international and local financial vultures since 2018 and would amount to nearly a third of the total government budget.

The Finance Secretariat, moreover, calculates that business tax exemptions, particularly for maquiladoras at the 24 Export Processing Zones (EPZ) in the country, will amount to 37 billion lempiras (\$1.5 billion) this year. Meanwhile, the average salary for the 132,000 workers making clothes, auto parts and other products at maquiladoras is \$40 per week.

In other words, in the most unequal country of the Americas, billions are transferred each year from the wealth created by the working class to the financial and corporate elites through debt payments and tax exemptions, while more than 60 percent of the population lives in poverty.

The rural areas are also simmering with social opposition. On April 2, farmers across the country were joined in protests by Lenca indigenous groups from the western Intibucá department, who marched to Tegucigalpa to demand debt pardons and oppose foreclosures surrounding the near-bankruptcy of the state-owned National Bank for Agricultural Development (Banadesa). Hundreds carried out

peaceful marches and set up roadblocks in more rural departments in the north (Colón), south (Valle) and east (Olancho) of the country.

The sustained concentration of land, the building of dams, deforestation and severe drought have pushed thousands of the most impoverished peasant families to the brink of starvation and forced many to migrate north.

The Trump administration, however, is ramping up its attacks against immigrants to cultivate its fascistic base, including the militarization of the border, the illegal erosion of asylum rights, threats to end the Temporary Protected Status for 57,000 Hondurans, and mass deportations. Hundreds of thousands seeking to escape the desperate and deadly conditions in the country and cities in Honduras, with its widespread gangs and brutal state repression, are being sent back.

The latest demonstrations signal coming social upheavals involving the broadest sectors of workers and oppressed. US imperialism and the Honduran client elite have been preparing by strengthening the repressive apparatus and using electoral fraud and the military to keep their preferred political representatives in power. This saw the killing of 32 demonstrators in protests against the electoral fraud in November 2017.

Since the 2009 coup, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the Honduran military budget has tripled, to a proportion of the GDP not seen since 1990. This doesn't include hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid from the Pentagon, which uses its military bases in Honduras as a launching platform for interventions across the region.

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