

With national strike set for November 21, political crisis intensifies in Colombia

By Evan Blake
19 November 2019

Following revelations that the Colombian military murdered at least eight children in a bombing attack in the southern region of Caquetá, the government of President Iván Duque has been thrown into a deep crisis.

The first national strike since 2016 is scheduled to take place this Thursday, November 21, and there are growing calls for Duque's resignation. Recent opinion polls show that 69 percent of the Colombian population disapproves of the Democratic Center (CD) Duque administration.

As the popular revolt continues in Chile, and thousands protest the US-backed military coup in Bolivia, the crisis in Colombia is creating the conditions for another mass revolt by the working class in Latin America.

In the face of immense popular opposition to the entire political setup in Colombia, the country's major trade unions and the pseudo-left coalition Alternative Democratic Pole (PDA) called for a one-day national strike as a means of letting off steam. Initially centered solely on the government's economic policies, the call for the strike has gained wider support, with dozens of indigenous and student groups organizing independently, shifting the central demand to the ouster of Duque. The last national strike in 2016 was more limited and did not involve masses of students.

Commenting on the explosive situation, a member of the Colombian government speaking anonymously to *El Espectador* Saturday said, "The problem that the government has is that this national strike is growing by what is happening in Chile or Bolivia and I do not see a strong negotiator who can prevent a social outburst."

In response to the looming strike, the Duque administration has begun to prepare a brutal crackdown by the military and police. To create a pretext for this police buildup, Vice President Marta Lucia Ramirez recently gave a fearmongering speech in which she falsely claimed that "many are calling for violence." In reality, all those organizing the national strike have called for it to remain peaceful.

Over the weekend, it was leaked that Duque intends to

sign a decree this week enabling local authorities to impose curfews during the strike, and to ban the carrying of arms and the consumption of alcohol. In addition, the commander of the Colombian armed forces, General Luis Fernando Navarro, secretly ordered the quartering of all of the country's 250,000 soldiers beginning Monday and lasting through the national strike, to be ready to suppress the protests and impose the curfews. In the leaked orders, Navarro commands all military personnel to be on "maximum alert status." In addition to the military, local authorities have announced that 10,000 police will be deployed in the capital Bogotá and 7,000 in Medellín, Colombia's second-largest city.

In an effort to whip up xenophobia and deflect growing hostility to their policies, the state has deported 11 people from the country over the past week, including Venezuelan, Chilean and Spanish citizens, branding them as "infiltrators" seeking to "affect the social order." Migration chief Christian Kruger has warned that many others are on the authorities' "watch list" for deportation, and that the state is considering closing the country's borders during the national strike.

Far-right paramilitaries associated with Duque's political mentor, former president Alvaro Uribe, himself guilty of innumerable crimes against the Colombian population, have announced the formation of "anti-riot squads" that will "accompany the security forces" in Medellín.

Significantly, last week Colombia's center-right parties, including the Liberal Party, Radical Change and the Social Party of National Unity, voiced support for the protests, further isolating the Duque administration. In local elections held last month, conservative and far-right parties lost a number of seats in Congress, meaning that without these three parties' support Duque's coalition will be in a minority and unable to pass any legislation.

After a far-right campaign characterized by fascistic law-and-order demagoguery, Duque was elected in June 2018 due to popular disaffection with the traditional Liberal and Conservative parties that had controlled Colombian politics

since 1853. His pseudo-left opponent in the election, ex-guerrilla Gustavo Petro, lost primarily because he had previously endorsed the discredited Liberal party coalition under former President Juan Manuel Santos.

Since coming to power, Duque has carried out an unrelenting assault on the Colombian working class. Following his inauguration, Duque immediately proposed a “National Development Plan” (PND) that was signed into law earlier this year. The PND entails major cuts to the nation’s pension and healthcare systems, while imposing regressive consumer taxes of up to 37 percent on textiles and continuing deforestation practices. Throughout his reign, Duque has also continually scrapped commitments agreed to in the 2016 peace accord reached between Santos and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

The Colombian working class continues to suffer the effects of the decades-long civil war that began with the 1948 assassination of Liberal Party candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitan and was largely orchestrated by American imperialism. It became the longest armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere, in which the vast majority of the 267,000 killed were civilians. Colombia became the closest Latin American ally of US imperialism, receiving billions of dollars in military aid from Democratic and Republican administrations. As a result of Washington’s patronage, the country was admitted as a “global partner” of the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military alliance.

The 2016 peace accord, for which Santos won the Nobel Peace Prize, was a fraud. According to the think tank *Indepaz*, more than 700 people have been assassinated in Colombia since the signing of the 2016 deal with the FARC, including over 200 under the Duque administration. Many of the victims were members of the FARC.

In response to the social attacks carried out by the Duque administration, the past year has seen an upsurge of the class struggle in Colombia. In April 2019, a nationwide strike of students and teachers broke out, which drew in farmers, pensioners and other workers to defend public education. On July 27, in response to the escalation of assassinations of opposition politicians and activists under Duque, a nationwide “March for Life” was launched.

On August 29, following Duque’s repeated violations of the 2016 peace accord, a dissident faction of the FARC leadership announced a resumption of armed struggle against the government. Hours later, with logistical support from the US military, the Colombian military bombed a building in the southern region of Caquetá, which they claimed was a FARC stronghold.

Two weeks ago, a report was released documenting that eight children were among those killed in the bombing, a

fact which the government knew and sought to suppress. The revelation of yet another military slaughter against children fueled popular outrage against the Duque administration, prompting the resignation of Colombian Defense Minister Guillermo Botero.

Botero has been replaced by Carlos Holmes Trujillo, a dynasty politician, signaling that there will be no change in military policy. After nearly 15 days, Duque finally broke his silence in a radio interview last week in which he gave categorical immunity to the military, stating, “The army and the military forces cannot be classified as murderers of minors and children” and that “there was never any information that there were minors in the operation.”

Contrary to Duque’s claims, reports have surfaced that prior to the bombing the Colombian military was warned six times by local authorities that FARC was recruiting minors in the area. Opposition Senator Alexander Lopez (Democratic Pole) announced recently that he will bring the case before the International Criminal Court (ICC), meaning that Duque and other officials could potentially be charged with committing war crimes against their own citizens.

Last week, the Colombian news agency Noticias Uno cited local residents in Aguas Claras II, the town closest to the site of the bombing, who claimed that the bombing in fact killed between 16 and 18 children, not eight as claimed by the government. Further, resident José Fernando Saldaña told the news agency that the soldiers “brought dogs that chased children and killed them.”

Given the revelations of government criminality and with social tensions continually rising, Thursday’s general strike has the potential—in spite of the intentions of the strike’s organizers—of igniting a struggle akin to those in Chile and Ecuador.

In order for their struggle to be successful, Colombian workers must break free of the stranglehold that the unions and pseudo-left political parties have placed on the class struggle for decades. Workers must form their own independent rank-and-file factory and neighborhood committees to coordinate their battle against the Duque administration, Colombia’s ruling oligarchy and its imperialist patrons. Above all, a new revolutionary leadership must be built as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>