

In defiance of repression, Colombian workers mount second national strike in the past week

By Evan Blake
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On Wednesday, Colombian workers and peasants took part in the second national strike of the past week.

Following the largest national strike in decades held last Thursday, in which hundreds of thousands peacefully protested against the right-wing Democratic Center (CD) administration of President Ivan Duque, state security forces mounted a counterattack, killing three protesters and injuring hundreds. In response, huge demonstrations took place again Saturday evening, including thousands rallying outside Duque's private residence. *Cacerolazos* have taken place nightly across the country, in which thousands bang empty pots and pans in a deafening symbol of protest.

News broke late Monday that 18-year-old Dilan Cruz died in hospital, after he was shot in the head with a tear gas canister fired by Mobile Anti-Disturbances Squadron (ESMAD) riot police on Saturday. Cruz's death had come to symbolize the brutality of ESMAD's response to the peaceful protests, and further galvanized mass opposition to Duque. Before the strike, the latest Gallup poll showed Duque's approval rating at a dismal 26 percent, which has sunk even further since the protests began.

On Twitter, the hashtag #ParoNacionalIndefinido, or "indefinite national strike," has been trending throughout Colombia for the past week. Colombians have drawn immense inspiration from the mass struggles in Chile and Ecuador, as well as the protests against the military coup in Bolivia, impelling masses into struggle. The Colombian general strike took place the day after Chile held its third national strike in six weeks of protests, and as the entire South American continent is wracked by social explosions.

Duque responded to the surge in support for the strike by organizing a meeting with the Comité del Paro (Strike Committee), the leaders of the main trade

unions and student groups that organized the national strike. These include the Central Union of Workers (CUT), the General Confederation of Workers (CGT), the Confederation of Workers of Colombia (CTC), as well as other major trade unions, all of which have worked to suppress the class struggle in Colombia for decades.

The trade unions first called the national strike as a means of letting off steam, as social inequality and state violence have become unbearable in Colombia. Following revelations in early November that the military murdered at least eight children in a bombing attack in August, and that five indigenous leaders were murdered in Cauca in October, student and indigenous groups joined with the trade unions, vastly expanding the size of the national strike.

Talks between the Strike Committee, the Duque administration and business leaders were held Monday and Tuesday. At the meetings, Duque proposed a four-month Gran Conversación Nacional (Great National Conversation), to be held between government, business and union leaders, as an exercise in pseudo-democratic posturing to dissipate the immense anger among protesters. Duque made clear that he will not accede to the most minimal demands put forward by the Strike Committee leaders, prompting them to walk out and call for another national strike, knowing full well they could not sell Duque's proposal to the increasingly radicalized masses.

After walking out, the Strike Committee leaders released their "manifesto" of 13 reformist demands. These include the withdrawal of a regressive tax bill illegally enacted last year, the dissolution of the widely hated ESMAD riot police, toothless pledges not to privatize state assets, re-implementing the fraudulent

2016 peace accords with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla movement, coordinating environmental and free trade agreements with select agencies and the retraction of various austerity measures enacted by the Duque administration.

None of these demands impinges upon the profit interests of Colombia's ruling elite or their imperialist patrons. The fact that the trade union leaders would put forward such palliatives when the entire country is convulsed in struggle underscores their reactionary perspective, which is based on maintaining capitalism and the subjugation of Colombia by US imperialism.

On Wednesday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo personally called Duque to pledge "steadfast support" for his administration. A State Department press release said that Pompeo "welcomed the national conversation that President Duque has convened in Colombia in response to recent demonstrations."

After a leaked phone call last week between Colombia's ambassador to the US, Francisco Santos Calderón, and the country's incoming foreign minister, Claudia Blum, Calderón was flown to Bogotá to meet with Duque. In the leaked call, Calderón derided the current US State Department for being insufficiently aggressive in carrying out its plans for regime-change in Venezuela.

After meeting with Duque Monday, Calderón received no reprimand and was sent straight back to Washington. There is a very real possibility that the Duque administration, in tandem with Washington, may try to fabricate a pretext for military intervention in Venezuela in the near future, both as a means of diverting social tensions in Colombia outwards and to implement longstanding plans for a military coup in the country.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, with the launching of the civil conflict in 1964, the Colombian state became among the most right-wing in Latin America, funneling arms to fascistic paramilitaries responsible for killing tens of thousands of civilians. Colombia became the chief client state of US imperialism in the region, receiving billions of dollars in arms sales and military aid as part of the fraudulent "War on Drugs."

The cumulative impact of this long period of reaction and conflict has been immense. Colombia is now home

to over 7.6 million internally displaced people, or over 15 percent of the country's population, and nearly 20 percent of the world's total. The country is riven by immense social inequality, in which the three richest people have as much wealth as the bottom ten percent of society, while over 12.7 million Colombians live on less than US\$2 per day.

As the country's history and the ongoing violent suppression of peaceful protests demonstrate, appeals to the state, which represents the interests of the Colombian ruling class and foreign capitalists, are futile. This is the bankrupt perspective being put forward by the official trade union leadership of the national strikes.

The fact that hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets, in spite of Colombia's long history of brutally suppressing the class struggle, points to the immense radicalization that has taken place within the population. In opposition to the state-sanctioned union leadership, the Colombian workers must form their own rank-and-file factory and neighborhood committees, to prepare for the revolutionary overthrow of the Duque administration and the entire state apparatus.

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