

Colombian trade unions working with President Duque to shut down national strike movement

By Evan Blake
6 December 2019

For the third time in two weeks, a national strike brought large parts of Colombia to a standstill Wednesday. Although smaller than the first national strike on November 21—in large part due to waning confidence in the official trade union leadership—tens of thousands again expressed their determination to oppose the right-wing Democratic Center (CD) administration of President Iván Duque. Polls released Wednesday showed that Duque's approval rating has dropped to 24 percent, a 13-point drop since July and his lowest since taking office in August 2018.

Triggered by rising unemployment and inequality, a series of reactionary fiscal policies and deepening state repression against students, indigenous peoples and ex-guerrillas, the strike wave marks the largest anti-government protests since 1977. Protesters have drawn inspiration from the rising tide of global class struggles, with many comparing their political situation to that faced by protesters in Chile, Ecuador and other countries ruled by intransigent right-wing parties.

On Wednesday evening, members of the hated Mobile Anti-Disturbances Squadron (ESMAD) riot police violently broke up protests in four of Colombia's five largest cities. Firing tear gas indiscriminately, they injured at least one and arrested dozens in Bogotá, Medellín, Cali and Bucaramanga.

Throughout the protests of the past two weeks, state police and soldiers have sought to intimidate protesters into submission, killing five and injuring over 100 over the past two weeks. Last week, 18-year-old Dilan Cruz succumbed to his injuries after being shot point blank in the head with a tear gas canister fired by ESMAD police.

During the first week of protests, which entailed two

national strikes and daily marches involving thousands, the estimated total economic impact amounted to some US\$342 million (COP\$1.2 trillion), according to the business association Fenalco.

Last week, Duque attempted to quell the protests by holding private discussions with the Comité del Paro (Strike Committee), the leaders of the main trade unions and student groups that organized the national strike. In their initial meeting, Duque solely offered to begin a four-month pseudo-democratic Gran Conversación Nacional (Great National Conversation) and rejected outright the strike leaders' list of 13 reformist demands. In response, the leaders left negotiations and met with Congressional figures from opposition parties the following day during the second national strike.

Knowing that he is widely despised by the population, and that the strikes have been broadly supported, Duque again sought to come to terms with the Strike Committee prior to Wednesday's strike. He invited them to meet to discuss their set of 13 demands, with the provision that they call off this week's strike. The Strike Committee—headed by student representatives and the leaders of the Central Union of Workers (CUT), the General Confederation of Workers (CGT), the Confederation of Workers of Colombia (CTC) and other major trade unions—met with Duque but did not call off the strike. They then met with him again Thursday for merely 30 minutes.

The only result coming out of Thursday's brief meeting was that the Strike Committee acceded to Duque's demand that they write a document that elaborates more fully on their 13 demands, which they will discuss together again on December 11. It is thus

plainly evident that Duque and the Strike Committee are working in tandem to dissipate the immense opposition to social inequality and government criminality by dragging out the protests ad infinitum and reaching a rotten compromise on the 13 demands.

The content of the 13 demands is already perfectly clear in the Strike Committee's initial "manifesto." They include the following: meaningless pledges that the government will not privatize state assets or the state pension system, the dissolution of ESMAD, the review of free trade agreements, reinstating the provisions of the 2016 peace accords with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla movement, implementation of anti-corruption bills, the withdrawal of a regressive tax reform bill and other minor reforms. Not a single one of these demands represents an infringement upon the wealth of the ruling elite.

On Tuesday, Congress advanced the regressive tax reform bill listed in the Strike Committee's demands. This provocative action underscores the bankruptcy of the reformist perspective of the union leadership, which seeks to cultivate illusions in the potential for compromise with all politicians, including the deeply reactionary Duque. In fact, the entire state apparatus functions in the interests of the Colombian bourgeoisie and foreign capital.

The Strike Committee has called for a fourth national strike to take place on December 10, after which they plan to take a break for the holiday season, in yet another move to stifle the anger and energy of the masses.

Colombian workers must assimilate the lessons of the past 40 years, in which the trade unions internationally have become thoroughly integrated into the corporations and the state. Through the globalization of production, any program based on reforming capitalism within the nation-state system has become totally unviable.

If the series of national strikes and daily protests by thousands continue in the same way, under the same conservative trade union leadership, nothing will be accomplished. In opposition to the official Strike Committee, workers must elect their own rank-and-file factory and neighborhood committees to orient their struggle in a revolutionary direction and fight to forge links with workers across the Americas and around the

world. Only through such an international orientation can the problems workers confront in Colombia be addressed.

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