

Police repression continues during national strike in Colombia

By Andrea Lobo
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A national strike and major marches took place on Monday in Colombia to protest recent police killings, a massacre of protesters on September 9 and the broader government response to the social crisis deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite its peaceful character, anti-riot police broke up the mass demonstration in the capital of Bogotá, confirming the continued drive of the Ivan Duque administration and the entire Colombian ruling class toward dictatorship.

This follows the bloody clampdown on September 9 against mass protests in Bogotá that erupted after the police tortured and killed worker Javier Ordóñez the previous night. The National Police used gunfire in a systematic fashion, killing 14—eight young workers in the service sector, two young engineers, one university student, and three whose backgrounds were unclear—and leaving 72 people wounded by bullets.

On Monday, people in cars, bicycles and on foot formed caravans across the cities of Bogotá, Medellín, Barranquilla, Cartagena, Bucaramanga and Cali, and significant demonstrations took place in smaller cities from the coastal Tumaco to Magangué, up the southern Andes range in Villavicencio and to Arauca next to the Venezuelan border. Socially heterogenous marches grew into the thousands in Medellín and Bogotá.

In the afternoon, the police reported significant gatherings in 107 municipalities (out of 1,103) and said repeatedly that they were “all peaceful.” They were also largely following health protocols to minimize infections. Nonetheless, the mayor of Bogotá, Claudia López of the Green Alliance, nervously called on people to be home by 7 p.m.

Before 5:00 p.m., however, as a mass gathering in Bogota’s Plaza Bolívar kept growing, López pointed to one isolated and suspect incident of looting, in a heavily patrolled area, to order the Mobile Anti-Riot Squadron (ESMAD) to disperse all demonstrators, media and human rights observers alike. The ESMAD moved in violently with armored vehicles, tear gas, stun grenades, batons and rubber bullets.

Dozens were immediately snatched into police vehicles, while others were chased and beaten up. Tear gas canisters and stun grenades were shot directly at protesters, leaving some with severe injuries. Mayor López then tweeted a video

showing a line of riot police surrounding the emptied Plaza Bolívar, adding, “There are no injuries and calm has been reestablished.”

The repression happened as a new cellphone video began circulating online, showing Javier Ordoñez, in agony and handcuffed on the floor of a police station, as cops watched amused. The video refutes the official police version claiming that Ordoñez “harmed himself” at the station.

Monday’s demonstrations are only the tip of the iceberg. Millions of outraged workers are eager to fight against the murderous Duque regime and see the police repression as a defense of intolerable levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality.

On Monday, demonstrators called for an “end to police abuse,” “jobs and income,” “no privatizations,” and “an end to handing over our country’s resources.”

With a seven-day average of 7,000 new daily cases, Colombia has the fifth-highest number of cases in the world, with more than 770,435 cases and nearly 25,000 deaths. Fatalities have been concentrated among the poorest layers, which have been forced to risk exposure to earn a living, while official efforts to contain the pandemic have been abandoned.

The National Strike Committee, composed of the three main trade-union centrals, focused its demands on “a restructuring of the National Police and resignation of the Defense Minister.” It also called for the cancelling of decree 1174—which they claim promotes part-time employment—and suspending a \$370 million loan to the bankrupt airline Avianca.

The real reason behind convoking the strike was summarized by former presidential candidate Gustavo Petro, who tweeted as early as September 10: “I have asked you the union centrals to call a strike, but you might not do it. The people will [strike] regardless.” In other words, with only 4.6 percent of workers affiliated to trade unions, these apparatuses serve merely as fronts for the bourgeois political establishment to intervene in times of social unrest in order to contain it.

Petro, Mayor López and the entire establishment “opposition” to Duque have also centered their calls on resignations in the Defense Ministry and the “reform” of the National Police.

These trade unions and parties, thousands of whose members

and leaders have been murdered by the Colombian security forces, understand more than anyone the futility of calling for a superficial overhaul of the police.

In fact, their demands expose their staunch defense of Colombian capitalism and imperialism, whose existential crisis has been deepened by the pandemic, and are aimed at duping workers and youth with illusions in the prospects of democratic and social reforms within bourgeois politics, while preparations are made for a further crackdown.

The Duque administration and the corporate media are already working to criminalize all forms of protest. In a manner similar to the *New York Times* in the United States, *Noticias RCN* published on September 10 a fabricated report from the Colombian intelligence agencies claiming that the protests were being “coordinated” by the guerrillas on social media.

The following day, *Semana* doubled down with a video on “the hidden causes of the protests,” claiming that social media was inciting “unjustified violent protests” led by “criminals and organized anarchists.” The video then calls for building up the Bogotá police.

RCN is owned by Carlos Ardila Lulle (net worth \$1.5 billion), a business partner of Rupert Murdoch. *Semana* is owned by banker Jaime Gilinski Bacal (net worth \$3.5 billion), who became the main benefactor of the privatization of Banco de Colombia, by raising money from international investors to buy it.

Washington, for its part, endorsed the massacring of protesters in Colombia. As it continued to shed crocodile tears over “democracy” in Venezuela, the US State Department and Pentagon made no statement to condemn the repression in Colombia and seamlessly continued joint activities with the Colombian National Police.

The US Embassy tweeted on September 12: “Colombia counts with the US in tough times. Allies and Friends.” This was followed by joint war games and a visit by State Secretary Michael Pompeo in Bogotá, aimed at threatening the Venezuelan government.

The day of the massacre, the US International Development Finance Corporation granted the Colombian bank Davivienda \$250 million to weather the crisis. The bank is owned by Grupo Bolívar, a major financial backer of Duque.

This attitude is not limited to the Trump administration and the Republicans. According to a cable published by WikiLeaks, the Colombian Army inspector general told the US ambassador in February 2009 that the military’s “extrajudicial execution problem was widespread” and stemmed from “the insistence by some military commanders on body counts as a measure of success...coupled with some commanders’ ties to criminals and narcotraffickers.” The Democratic Obama administration in power at the time continued to pour in billions in military aid.

As Washington ratchets up its confrontations against its geopolitical rivals—chiefly Russia and China—and faces growing social unrest at home, the vassal state in Colombia constitutes a

military and economic stronghold for US imperialism to secure its domination over Latin America. The Colombian Police, specifically, has been built up by US imperialism as a quasi-military force to wage counter-insurrectionary operations against guerrillas and working-class opposition, while it carries out even more US-sponsored trainings of regional special forces than the Colombian military itself.

The fight against police abuse and authoritarianism constitutes a struggle against the entire Colombian oligarchy, its imperialist patrons and their hirelings in the trade unions and political parties. This includes those forces that, throughout the post-World War II period, portrayed themselves as socialist and even revolutionary only to channel opposition behind claims that one or another faction of the national bourgeoisie was more “democratic,” chiefly the Stalinist Communist Party of Colombia (PCC) and the Socialist Workers Party (PST). The latter was founded by the anti-Trotskyist revisionist Nahuel Moreno.

Both have joined the bandwagon of calls for police “restructuring” and resignations, with the PST arguing in defense of “good police and soldiers that refuse to repress their class brothers.”

The NGO Temblores has documented 664 police killings since 2017, while many more have been killed by the military.

Colombia’s 330,000 troops and 167,000 police—which compare to 321,000 formal teachers—constitute the core of the capitalist state, conceived of by Marxists as “special bodies of armed men” committed to enforcing class rule.

Drawing from this conception, Russian Revolutionary Vladimir Lenin wrote in *State and Revolution* that “it follows that the ‘special coercive force’ for the suppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie, of millions of working people by handfuls of the rich” must be abolished in revolution and replaced by a workers’ state that “takes possession of the means of production in the name of society.”

The only political organization fighting for this program, rooted in a long history of struggle against all forms of Stalinism, bourgeois nationalism and the pseudo-left internationally, is the International Committee of the Fourth International, the World Party of Socialist Revolution. The only revolutionary road forward is to build a section of the ICFI in Colombia and every country.

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