

# Colombia: When The Shock Treatment Doesn't Work

The successful mobilization of over five million Colombian workers September 14 in a 24-hour general strike against extreme austerity and military repression serves as a lesson in political economy for those who would try to indiscriminately impose the IMF and World Bank financial "shock treatment" on a mobilized working class.

## COLOMBIA

Inside of 24 hours, President Alfonso Lopez Michelsen, faithful implementor of Wall Street's policy during most of his three years in office, turned himself into a lame duck. Lopez will serve the remaining months of his term as a figurehead, while an increasingly strong military presence in government confronts a mobilized working class fighting for its life.

In one blow, the successful strike politically destroyed the President and radically shifted the likely outcome of the February pre-elections which determine who will be the Liberal Party presidential candidate.

Julio Cesar Turbay, who until August looked like a shoo-in for the Liberal candidacy because of his strong pro-development program and his hold on important sections of the Liberal machine, virtually destroyed himself by going against the strike. Lopez's discreditation is a severe blow to Turbay as well.

Ex-President Carlos Lleras Restrepo, Turbay's opponent in the Liberal pre-candidate's race, is strengthened by Lopez's stumble. Lleras kept his own hands clean, while mildly criticizing the President's handling of labor, his allies in the Liberal Party egged on the President in his insane confrontationist posture. Lopez obliged, putting Lleras in the prime electoral position.

### *The Strike*

With annual inflation running at 44 percent officially, accompanied by the collapse of hospital, school, sewage, water and other essential service systems, the Colombian worker had no choice but to join the communist-organized strike movement demanding a fifty percent wage increase, freeze on prices of food and essential services, and an end to "state of siege" laws. By mid-August, even the agent-run "democratic" union federations, CTC and UTC, were forced by pressure from their membership to support the strike.

At that point President Lopez Michelsen, to the cheerleading of the Lleras-linked Liberal Bogota dailies, *Tiempo* and *Espectador*, and most of the Liberal Party,

moved into an open confrontationist posture. Open redbaiting was backed by decrees prohibiting all public demonstrations, censorship of television and radio coverage of strike news, and the draconian Decree 2004 by which any striking worker could be jailed for up to 180 days.

Lopez's most provocative statement was his claim August 29 that workers had no "reason" to strike because the cost of living had dropped significantly for the month of July— an argument that even the planners of the liquidity squeeze and austerity regimen known as a "shock treatment" do not accept.

The Communist-led unionists were determined to accomplish a total shutdown as a show of force against Lopez's intransigence. According to all reports, they succeeded admirably. EIR correspondents on the scene in Bogota reported a 100 percent effective shutdown of the city. In most other major cities, the strike was 70 to 90 percent effective. Numerous peasant, student and professional organizations backed the strike as well.

By the early hours of the morning, Lopez had deployed 100,000 troops into the streets, who faced off against strike supporters out to stop buses and other public transportation from moving.

According to reliable reports, frightened troops were issued orders to shoot by an hysterical officer corps. The result was 20 dead and hundreds wounded. The Army has acknowledged that most of the casualties were women and children.

The strike as a whole remained highly disciplined and an undisputed success although Maoist and Trotskyist provocateur groups incited lumpen mobs to looting rampages in some neighborhoods of the capital.

The Paris-based *Le Monde* in its weekend edition ran a front-page story under the headline "A Warning in Colombia," recognizing the danger of the growing strength of the Communist Party (CP) of Colombia — as the only one in Latin America that really threatens Wall Street's power. "The left," they write, "harassed by the government and divided, has not known, up to this point, how to capitalize on the massive discontent.... But the 14th of September is a warning to the political layers in Colombia."

The CP continues to organize around the strike demands, making it very difficult for the agent-section of the labor movement to back down from their militant posture. Their reply to the co-optive proposal to invite them onto the corporatist National Council on Salaries has been to demand that the body — set up to get the unions to police themselves vis a vis wage increases — discuss all of the demands of the strike as agenda items.

The likelihood of another wave of strikes leading to a new general strike is quite high.

#### *Lopez as a "Bordaberry"*

The remaining months of Lopez's Administration will increasingly become the rule of the Colombian military acting behind Lopez's democratic facade, in a parody of Uruguay, where President Juan Bordaberry now fronts for a military junta.

Some would say the transition has already taken place. Reporter Carlos Gueron, writing in the Venezuelan newsweekly *Resumen*, notes that the long months of state of siege which Colombia has already endured "aren't very different from how things would have been if Lopez's title were 'general' instead of 'doctor'."

Generals Varon Valencia, Minister of Defense, and Camacho Leyva, Commander of the Armed Forces and named by the Communist Party as a coup plotter, have made it clear that they have no interest in a coup... since they no longer need one.

Speaking on national radio in a joint interview, General Varon Valencia declared that "the loyalty with which both police and military dealt with the strike situation is sufficient proof that the public can dispense with any fears that the military harbors desires for a coup." General Camacho Leyva defended the repressive measures as necessary and even "highly beneficial."

Lopez did not wait a day after the strike to give his thanks to these two. In a press statement, the President described the strike as "a small April 9 which was frustrated thanks to the support of the Armed Forces..." April 9 is a reference to the "Bogotano" — the 1948 uprising following the assassination of the populist Liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitan — which led directly to ten years of Civil War, during which the military and police forces slaughtered 300,000 men, women and children in the name of "protecting the institutions."

#### *The Aftermath*

When the working class didn't back down September 14, most of the President's erstwhile supporters did, panic-stricken by the overwhelming demonstration of working-class muscle. Only *Tiempo* of Bogota is still

sticking to the hardline that all the newspapers manifested before the strike, attacking the "subversives" and effusively praising the military.

The rival Bogota Liberal paper, *Espectador*, reflecting the terror unleashed within ruling circles by the successful strike, acknowledges that the Lopez government and the Liberal Party as a whole took a real beating. Post-strike editorials have called for conciliation with labor, hinting that the government might consider bringing the Communist union federations into the National Salaries Council.

For the *Journal of Commerce*, U.S. conservative financial daily, the strike was a lesson in economics, teaching them that wages don't really cause inflation — at least not always. In a page one article on the September 20 edition, their correspondent wrote:

"Many — including foreign economic experts — argue that wage increases are not an important component of inflation in Colombia at present, that is due mainly to the enormous inflow of coffee dollars, that there is plenty of currency available for importing foodstuffs if excessive demand generates more shortages..."

#### *The UNO Option*

Since the major contenders in the upcoming Presidential election lack either the program or the credibility or both to deal with the crisis, the possibility of a victory for the Communist-led electoral coalition, UNO, is emerging. The CP's successful mobilization of almost five million workers in the national strike lays the basis for a UNO election victory.

The Partido Laboral Andino (PLAN), co-thinker organization of the U.S. Labor Party, has launched a campaign to turn the five million strikers into five million voters for the UNO coalition. The aim is to work with the UNO in educating the working class around a program which will extend the demands of the strike into a positive program for industrialization and rapid development of Colombia's productive resources.

Without the UNO's adoption of such a policy, Colombia could well find itself under effective military rule by next summer.

—L. Hecht

### Jamaican CP Chief:

## Stop Debt Payment To Halt IMF Coups

*Jamaica's leading communist, Dr. Trevor Munroe, gave the entire Third World a lesson in clear strategic thinking Sept. 4 when he laid down two fundamentals of current political reality during a nation-wide radio address: 1) The Carter-Mondale Administration is ultimately responsible for fascist coup plots in the developing nations; 2) a minimal defense against these plots is a commitment to economic production over the payment of foreign obligations.*

*Reprinted below are selections from the address by*

*Munroe, Secretary General of the Workers Liberation League, as it appeared in Jamaica's Daily Gleaner Sept. 8.*

Nine months ago the working people voted to defeat imperialism and the big man in our country in December, 1976.

Since then, many of us have become confused, have become worried and upset because the same imperialism we organised to fight against, the same class of big