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Ten years since the US-backed coup in Honduras

Today marks the tenth anniversary of the US-backed coup that overthrow the elected president of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, who was dragged out of the presidential palace in his pajamas by armed troops, bundled onto an airplane and flown out of the country.

This event ushered in a decade of unending repression by a succession of extreme right-wing and deeply corrupt governments. They have ruled the country with a ruthless determination to defend the interests of the national oligarchy—the so-called “ten families” of multi-millionaires and billionaires—and of foreign finance capital.

For the masses of Honduran workers and rural poor, the policies implemented by the right-wing regimes that followed the ouster of Zelaya have proven disastrous. Honduras is today the most unequal country in Latin America, itself the most unequal region in the world. Nearly 70 percent of the country’s population lives in poverty, while over 60 percent lack formal employment. The murder rate, which soared to the highest in the world, still remains nine times that in the United States.



One result has been a mass exodus. The US government has reported detaining 175,000 Hondurans on the US-Mexican border in the last eight months. The country accounts for by far the largest share of migrants and refugees fleeing to the US border—30 percent of the total. This is nearly double the 16 percent share recorded just three years ago.

These masses of workers and their families fleeing their own country because of intolerable conditions created by imperialism and the native ruling class confront the same horrific circumstances that have shocked the population of the US and the world with the recent publication of the photograph of a Salvadoran father and his daughter who drowned together in the Rio Grande.

Just last April, an adult and three children from Honduras drowned in the same river when their raft capsized. On Thursday, Mexican authorities reported that a young Honduran woman traveling north with her family fell from a train and was crushed beneath its wheels.

Now these refugees are confronting the combined repression, detention and abuse from the governments of the United States, Mexico and Guatemala, which have united in the use of naked force in an attempt to prevent them from escaping poverty, state terror and rampant violence.

Democratic Party candidates and congressional leaders have shed crocodile tears over the deaths in the Rio Grande and postured as defenders of immigrants. These sentiments are belied, however, by the fact that Democratic President Barack Obama, the “deporter-in-chief”, and his then secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, presided over the coup that

devastated Honduras, driving its people in desperation to flee the country despite the threats of death, persecution and being thrown into a US concentration camp.

After Zelaya's overthrow, kidnapping and expulsion from the country, the Obama administration sought to preserve a veneer of commitment to "democracy" in Latin America—and deniability for its military, intelligence and diplomatic operatives—by publicly deploring the ouster of Zelaya.

Clinton, however, pointedly refused to describe the military's seizure and deportation of an elected president as a "coup," a designation that under the US Foreign Assistance Act, would have required the Obama administration to cut off aid and ties to the coup regime.

The administration likewise failed to demand Zelaya's reinstatement. Given that the US accounted for 70 percent of Honduran export earnings and provided the guns and aid upon which the country's military depended, it had unquestioned power to force a reversal of the coup.

Its formal reservations notwithstanding, however, it was soon revealed that top US officials had been in discussions with the military commanders and right-wing politicians who organized the coup shortly before Zelaya's overthrow.

A conservative and wealthy bourgeois politician of the Honduran Liberal Party, which regularly alternated power with the equally right-wing National Party under US and military-dominated regimes, Zelaya earned Washington's enmity by becoming swept up by Latin America's so-called "Pink Tide". This collection of bourgeois nationalist governments was able, thanks to the commodity boom and the rise of China's economic influence in the region, to adopt a posture of populism and independence from US imperialism.

For Zelaya, the clear attraction was cheap Venezuelan oil and loans. However, US imperialism, which had sought seven years earlier to overthrow Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in a civilian-military coup, was determined to eliminate a government aligned with Venezuela and Cuba in Honduras.

The Central American country has longed served as a staging ground for counterrevolutionary operations in the region, from the 1954 CIA overthrow of the Arbenz government in Guatemala through to the CIA-organized "contra" war against Nicaragua in the 1980s. The civil wars and counter-insurgency campaigns carried out by US imperialism in the region, using Honduras as its base, would claim the lives of hundreds of

thousands. It remains the site of the largest US military base in Latin America at Soto Cano.

Much the same US personnel involved in the 2002 coup against Chavez in Venezuela under George W. Bush were involved in the 2009 coup against Zelaya in Honduras under Barack Obama. And the same strategic policy guides the Trump administration's present regime change operation against the government of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela.

Underlying this clear continuity in Washington's foreign policy, under both Democratic and Republican administrations alike, is the drive by US imperialism to reverse the decline of its global economic hegemony by military means, particularly in the region that it has so long regarded as its "own backyard."

The Honduran working class responded to the 2009 coup with immense heroism. It staged continuous demonstrations and strikes in the teeth of savage repression. This included the arbitrary detention of thousands, the shooting of protesters, the gang rape of women detained at protests and the organization of death squads to assassinate journalists and opponents of the coup regime.

Washington ignored this savage brutality, and the US corporate media largely passed over it in silence.

For his part, Zelaya placed his faith in the pseudo-democratic façade of the Obama administration, appealing for its aid and submitting himself—and subordinating the mass movement against the coup—to a series of negotiations aimed at forming a "government of national unity" with those who overthrew him.

In the end, these negotiations led nowhere. The right-wing coup regime led by Zelaya's former Liberal Party ally Roberto Micheletti was able to drag out the process until rigged elections could be staged in November 2009, installing the right-wing government of Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo and allowing Washington and world imperialism to pretend that the coup had never happened.

Despite the heroism of the Honduran workers, the leadership of the unions and other organizations supporting Zelaya's reinstatement led the mass movement into a political blind alley, leaving the working class unprepared to confront Zelaya's capitulation and the consolidation of power by the coup regime under Lobo.

Honduras is today confronting its most severe crisis since the coup of ten years ago. For over a month, mass protests and strikes by teachers and doctors against sweeping IMF-

dictated cuts and threats of privatization of education and healthcare have rocked the country. Students have joined these mass protests, occupying their schools and confronting riot police and troops.

Today will see mass demonstrations throughout Honduras marking the coup anniversary. These protests will pay homage to the 136 killed during the repression of the protests against the coup, as well as the 14 murdered by death squads and the 13 disappeared. Since then, many more have been slain, including four killed in just the most recent protests.

They will undoubtedly also advance the demand for the bringing down of the government of Juan Orlando Hernández (JOH), the corrupt president and overseer for the International Monetary Fund, who is kept in power by the Honduran military and US Marines.

Zelaya, now the leader of the Partido Libertad y Refundación, is advancing this demand, once again from the standpoint of reaching a deal within the ruling oligarchy and securing support from Washington.

In 2009, the *World Socialist Web Site* stated that the struggle of the Honduran working class had “helped expose two great political fictions. The first is the pretense that the Obama administration has inaugurated a new era of non-intervention and mutual respect in US-Latin American relations. The second is that the region’s bourgeois regimes of a nationalist or populist stripe—from Venezuela’s Chavez to Zelaya himself—offer any way forward for the working class and oppressed masses.”

It went on to warn that those “calling themselves ‘socialists’ who promote illusions in these figures are disarming the working class and preparing even greater defeats.”

With the resurgence of the class struggle, these lessons are crucial. Workers can defend their rights only through a conscious break with all forms of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalism, which are instruments not for waging the class struggle but for suppressing it.

What is required is a political rearming and international unification of the working class of Honduras with workers throughout Central America, the United States and the entire hemisphere in a common struggle against capitalist exploitation, oppression and war. This means building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout the Americas.

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