

Agrarian South Network Research Bulletin

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CONJUNCTURAL AND STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF THE NATIONAL STRIKE IN COLOMBIA¹

Harold Beruth²

There are two general ideas that we as Federación Nacional Sindical Unitaria Agropecuaria (FENSUAGRO) would like to raise. One is the systematic violence of the character of State crimes, which we are currently experiencing, in this cycle of mobilization that began on April 28. Second, that the national strike continues and grows stronger.

To analyze what this mobilization has been, which has been going on for more than two weeks, it would be necessary to state that there are indeed more conjunctural elements and structural elements that explain why people have taken to the streets and remain and are willing to remain.

Let us say that on the conjunctural, we could talk about the tax reform, which was accompanied by the health reforms, the pension reform. A tax reform extremely harmful to the living conditions of the majority in Colombia, extremely facilitating and tailored to the economic sectors concentrated in the country.

But for that, it is also necessary to understand that there are structural conditions and that this mobilization is attached to other cycles of previous mobilizations. Among these structural conditions is a whole process that we call “neoliberalism of war”, imposed in this country during the last 30 years by a dominant sector in power, which is Uribe. What Uribismo means in Colombia is: the political vine, the mafia, the landowners, paramilitaries, gangsters, who have been in power for more than 30 years and who have remained in power with the constant use of weapons and state terror. While in Latin America in the last decades in some countries there were transitions between neoliberal governments and governments of the left or “progressive,” as they have been called during all this time, in Colombia what we had was neoliberalism of war, hard and pure and extreme violence and state terror.

Violence is a fundamental element to understand. Violence, dispossession, and impoverishment have been constant. Today we

¹ Transcript of the presentation made in the talk-debate “National strike, popular revolt and repression in Colombia”, held on May 14, 2021.

² Militante de la Federación Nacional Sindical Unitaria Agropecuaria - FENSUAGRO Doctorando en Estudios Sociales Agrarios (CEA-UNC).

see and mark racism, classism, and the patriarchal system that dominates this country, we see it clearly. In this, the high level of dispossession in the country has been fundamental to sustain the neoliberal project.

The Colombian rurality has endured a war of more than 60 years. The Peace Accords signed in 2016 were a possibility, a hope for Colombian society, especially for rural societies. What we see today is that the war in the country has intensified, to a point where people can no longer hold out, we no longer want more. The Peace Process has been betrayed by those who govern this country. A peace process which the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army (FARC-EP) ended. A peace process that began, as the peasant rationality in which we live immersed would say, from the bottom up, from point 6 onwards. It began with the abandonment of the use of the weapon by members of the FARC, and the remaining points signed have not been fulfilled. On the contrary, the violence has escalated. These territories here in Cauca, our rural Cauca for example, had a small moment of hope and tranquility after the signing of the peace agreement and what we see now is that the violence worsened and the dead are counted in heaps. Also on November 21 we came from a very strong indignation due to the number of murders of social and popular

leaderships, due to the massacre that had occurred against children by the National Army in a bombing. All this indignation is accumulating, all those levels of fatigue, what there is, is an erosion of the mode of government of this country, a deterioration that is deepening and where people are no longer willing to take it anymore.

The pandemic exacerbated the degrees of pauperization of working people. The economy of the popular sectors of this country collapsed. The impoverishment in this country is dramatic. Half of the population here lives from informal work, from what we know as the informal economy. And with the COVID-19, with the confinements and with the “non-public policy,” with this government’s attitude towards COVID-19, which instead put all the money to improve its image and to strengthen the war apparatus in the midst of the pandemic. All of this also contributed to increasing discontent.

We connect these mobilizations of April 28 with what happened on November 21, 2019, where there was also a very strong uprising. At that time, due to the labor reform, a long mobilization of more than two months was born, which is when the local, departmental, and regional assemblies were built, which even reached national assemblies. These are the bases of the current National

Strike Committee, where there are several sectors that met, which subsequently called for the strike on April 28, 2021.

For us as FENSUAGRO, as a peasant and popular movement, it must be said, we were surprised by the urban mobilization of April 28. We did not think that on April 28 the outbreak that we have today would be generated, because April 28 was planned as a mobilization day where people took to the streets because they were deeply outraged by all the number of elements that we have talked about right now, and tax reform as the spearhead. But the people decided to stay in the streets and remained in the streets and what we saw was that the treatment that the government of Iván Duque gave them (under the direct orders of Álvaro Uribe, he publishes through his twitter, which turns Mr. Uribe's twitter into a weapon of war) because people with those levels of repression, indignation and levels of resistance increased.

We know this type of violence historically, every time we peasants, indigenous people and Afro-Americans go out to block the Pan-American highway, that is the treatment they give us. Stigmatization as subversives, we are enemies, the construction of an internal enemy. For the governments of Colombia, the internal enemy is always the peasantry, the rural people, who are the guerrillas, and therefore it

is valid to assassinate that enemy, to massacre that enemy. But today the internal enemy is in the cities, it is the vandal, it is the hood, it is the one who breaks a glass, the one who breaks the Trasmilenio Stations or the public service, that is the new internal enemy they want to create. Women are also the internal enemy, that is why all this violence based on gender occurs, that is why we have 16 cases of sexual assault violence. That is the national security doctrine of this country. This is how this country has worked for decades and we in rural areas know that war because we have lived it all the time. And that war is the one that is being unleashed today in the cities and that has generated tremendous indignation in the people.

The strike continues, despite the fact that the mass media of this country have wanted to propose that normality return to the country. Normality does not exist. The country is still paralyzed in all its dimensions. Here in southwestern Colombia, for example, by decision of the mobilized organizations and the people at the different roadblock points, we decided to open a 48-hour humanitarian corridor in coordination with the government of Valle del Cauca and 42 municipalities so that food, gasoline, necessary supplies flowed for 48 hours. Why? Because we have to strengthen resistance, because people have to eat, we have to have drink, water, the necessary things

because we know that this strike is going to last and we are willing to continue in it, fighting with what we have and we have covered ourselves also with what we need. Surely the enemy has also taken cover from what he needs and has been doing it for a long time. So this strike continues and normality is not maintained in Colombia.

Recently a note came out from the businessmen of Pereira, there was a meeting in Cauca where the Cauca businesswomen met. Entrepreneurs are drowning because it is 15 days where production in the country has stopped, 15 days where tolls do not work, we have been unemployed for two weeks and normality does not exist. Gasoline began to flow only yesterday, by decision that we also made. But the losses for the business community are enormous as well. Surely there are cities where the intensity of the fight has diminished because it has been a great wear and tear, there are 15 days of fighting, there is a lot of repression. But also in different places more people are coming out to fight every day. We know that for example here in Cauca, more people have been joining the strike and in various rural areas they are joining the strike. So that if what we want to raise, the strike continues and is maintained and we consider that it should be continue and be maintained.

Where is the strike going to go? We do not know yet. In popular peasant wisdom here, a colleague said that we are waiting for the papayas to ripen to know how far this is going. But we believe that the strike continues.

And what is it that as peasants we seek? Well, our historical struggle as FENSUAGRO has been the struggle for land, the struggle for territory, for the constitution of peasant reserve areas, for peace agreements. So that there is peace with social justice in this country. We reached the signing of the peace accords, but our fundamental fight now is for the peace accords to be implemented and fulfilled. We have been threatened with Glyphosate spraying and forced eradication. They poison our territories with Glyphosate sprays, under the pretext of controlling the illicit drug industry. We know that this is nothing more than a pretext to deprive the peasantry of their lands. It is a weapon of war. We fight for that, we fight against Glyphosate, to be poisoned with Glyphosate, we fight against forced eradications. That is what the Coordinator of the Coca and Marijuana Leaf Cultivators is for.

Particularly as peasantry, these are our demands, there are specifications in the country that have been being built, we have the national specifications that the National Strike Committee has been discussing. But there are also other demands that have been gathered

with this mobilization that are adding to that sheet and that we must be very clear on that. The National Strike Committee must understand that there are multiple expressions in struggle and that this statement will have to be reviewed and analyzed.

A final comment, there is much talk of negotiation at this time and we are warning about that. We cannot fall into separate negotiations, we are looking for negotiations by sectors, by cities, by groups. The strategy is one of attrition and demobilization that is being applied by the Duque government, but there is talk of the great dialogue with everyone and with sectors. We have proposed what type of negotiation is being discussed. There can be no negotiations with murderers, it is a simple slogan, we cannot negotiate with people who are massacring, with a government that massacres and that has historically lied to us. So there are fundamental conditions; that the

entire country be demilitarized, because power has been handed over to the military. Whoever is ruling in this country or managing the protest in this country at this moment is the military. That it be demilitarized, that there be guarantees for protest and social and popular mobilization. And another element that there is no impunity, the investigations of all cases of police violence, military violence, all cases of state terrorism, racism and state crimes that we have assisted in this time must begin. We have more than 40 murdered, the injured number in the thousands and the disappeared by hundreds, that cannot go unpunished and we cannot negotiate on those terms. We cannot even speak of negotiations in those terms.

Well, these are the elements that I wanted to raise. We are still here, we continue to fight and with all the disposition and morale. Greetings to all, the people who are in the fields and cities resisting and fighting.