

Honduran migrant caravan broken up by Guatemalan troops, as devastation grows across Central America

Andrea Lobo
6 October 2020

A caravan of over 3,000 Honduran migrants was viciously broken up in a military operation ordered by the far-right Guatemalan government of President Alejandro Giammattei.

This is the first caravan after the coronavirus pandemic interrupted a constant stream of similar attempts since 2018 of workers and peasants escaping violence and poverty from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala to reach the United States.

Given the health risks, along with official threats of repression and even prison sentences, the caravan signals that growing layers of the population in Honduras and the region have reached a new level of social desperation—a phenomenon accompanied by growing popular demonstrations.

The caravan entered Guatemala on Friday unimpeded, but Giammattei—undoubtedly under pressure from the White House— then announced that he would enforce a “state of exception,” claiming the caravan constituted a COVID-19 contagion hazard. Suspending democratic rights in the departments involved, the administration deployed soldiers and police to violently halt and round up the migrants.

By Sunday, Guatemalan authorities claimed that they had deported over 2,000 of the caravan’s members, while smaller and disjointed groups kept attempting to reach Mexico on parallel routes. The following day, Guatemala raised the figure to 3,384 Hondurans sent back, i.e., virtually the entire caravan.

The Mexican government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador assisted in deterring migrants with a highly publicized show of force involving border police and troops on its southern border, where more than 26,000 Mexican soldiers had already been deployed against migrants under orders of the Trump administration.

López Obrador, who explicitly threatened caravan participants with prison sentences of up to 10 years citing COVID-19 regulations, made the unfounded and reactionary claim that the caravan was the product of a conspiracy to aid the Democratic Party in the US elections.

While they ingratiate themselves with the fascist president in the White House by halting the flow of workers and peasants escaping death threats and starvation, Giammattei and López Obrador have lifted COVID-19 regulations and sacrificed thousands of lives to safeguard the profits for transnational corporations and the local elites.

Across Central America, the economic re-openings are feeding an uninterrupted spread of the pandemic. The region reached an official toll of over 10,000 confirmed COVID-19 deaths and 408,258 cases as of yesterday.

In July, during the peak of the first wave of infections, the Honduran and Guatemalan governments began their gradual re-opening of nonessential economic activities. Guatemala has since lifted all restrictions, opening movie theaters, bars, amateur sports and parks. Both countries have seen a constant fluctuation in the 7-day average of new cases between roughly 500 and 900 cases.

In late August, the Salvadoran government recklessly lifted all COVID-19 restrictions on economic activities, simply calling on people to “abide by personal protection norms.” This has led to a second wave of infections.

Continuing its gradual lifting of business restrictions since late August, the Costa Rican government is now reopening bars and casinos, while seeing a constant growth in new daily cases. During the same period, Panama has carried out a full economic reopening that ended a slight drop in new cases.

Commercial air travel has resumed in all countries in

the region, after Belize began receiving tourists on October 1.

While all governments have now adopted in practice a “herd immunity” policy, the government of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua has pursued it most aggressively. Deaths consistent with COVID-19 symptoms are systematically tallied as “flu” and other conditions, while the government convokes public parades and provides no aid whatsoever for workers and small business. Schools reopened in mid-July—a step other regional governments have not taken.

While Honduras is the poorest country in the isthmus, the pandemic has driven the social catastrophe for the region’s workers to new depths. The UN estimates that the crisis will sink 1.5 million more people into poverty in Central America, surpassing 20 million in total out of the 50 million inhabitants.

These conditions and the criminal response of the ruling elites are stirring growing working class resistance.

The coronavirus closures saw waves of demonstrations and roadblocks in Panama, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras involving workers in the most impoverished layers of the population demanding economic aid. These were accompanied at times by health care workers demanding appropriate protective equipment.

More recently, protests have acquired broader and increasingly political demands. Student groups and workers protested in Guatemala City on August 22 against “hunger, poverty and inequality,” as well as austerity in public education, while demanding the fall of the right-wing Giammattei administration.

In Panama, on September 15, students, unions and peasant groups organized mass protests and widespread roadblocks to protest cuts in education, a regressive labor reform, and to demand land and social services for rural communities. More recently, construction workers and bus drivers have carried out demonstrations.

Most significantly, Costa Rica is entering its second week of roadblocks that have brought the country to a virtual standstill, with increasing calls on social media and within the trade unions for an indefinite national strike of the public and private sectors. These have centered around the cancellation of negotiations with the International Monetary Fund after a potential deal was announced involving mostly regressive taxes and the sale of state companies and institutions.

In each case, the trade unions and “opposition” establishment figures have employed appeals to nationalist sentiments to subordinate the opposition from

below behind talks with the corrupt national governments, which are wholly submissive to foreign capital.

The demonstrations have shown that workers across the region and internationally face the same concerns and the same enemies, the capitalist oligarchies and their imperialist patrons. The migrant caravans are only another expression of the same struggle among workers and peasants across the region.

Summarizing the results of a new study by the Economic Research and Teaching Center (CIDE) based on interviews of migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras en route to the United States, *El Faro* writes:

“They demand stable jobs, a better wage and legal social benefits, as well as greater investment in public services and infrastructure, above all in rural areas. Some stressed that the priority should be social investment and not security.”

On the other hand, as they carry out the murderous re-openings, governments are now resuming social austerity and exploiting the increased poverty and unemployment as a bludgeon to cut wages and social provisions. These measures are ultimately aimed at intensifying neocolonial exploitation by imperialism, which is responsible for the staggering levels of inequality and poverty.

A policy paper published last week by the Atlantic Council titled “Central American Economic Reactivation in a COVID-19 world,” insists that the key challenge is “to sustain reactivation of their economics in a COVID-19 world,” regardless of the resulting death toll.

Then, in the medium and long term, countries must exploit their proximity to the US, “competitive wages” and “large and young labor force” as a means for “nearshoring multinational firms,” especially those seeking cheap labor alternatives to China due to the US-led economic war. This requires, the paper notes, “rule of law” and promoting a “business-friendly environment,” citing the existing tax-exempt free trade zones.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact