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Panama

Protests follow arrest of union leaders in Panama

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Workers and indigenous peoples are mobilizing against the neoliberal agenda of the government of president José Raúl Mulino in Panama. Antônio Neto, from the Brazilian magazine *Movimento*, interviewed José Cambra on 27 June 2025 about the reasons for the movement, the relationship with US imperialism and the elements of the program of rupture that has become a symbol of popular resistance against austerity and authoritarianism.

Why have Panamanians been on strike for 54 days?

In recent months, Panama has become the epicentre of the struggle of Latin American peoples against unbridled capitalism, against neoliberalism, which is expressed in strikes. An indefinite strike was launched on 23 April by teachers in primary and secondary schools across the country. This was followed on 28 April by indefinite strikes by banana workers in the province of Bocas del Toro, on the Panamanian Atlantic coast, near the border with Costa Rica, as well as by construction workers, led by the Single National Union of Workers in Building and Allied Industries (Suntracs).

These strikes have several reasons. They are taking place, and this is important, a year after the inauguration of a president named Mulino, in the style of Bolsonaro in Brazil, Milei in Argentina, Duque in Colombia or Trump in the United States. This man won the elections by inheriting the political capital of former President Martinelli, who was tried and convicted for acts of corruption. Ricardo Martinelli was president between 2009 and 2014 and, becoming ineligible after his convictions, endorsed Mulino as his candidate.

Mulino campaigned on the theme "Martinelli is Mulino, Mulino is Martinelli" to restore economic prosperity to Panamanians. Ricardo Martinelli's two terms in office were marked by a period of economic prosperity in the sense that there were many jobs because of megaprojects (megaprojects, hotbeds of corruption at the origin of the conviction of Martinelli, currently exiled in Colombia).

But in Mulino's first year in office, there has been no job creation. On the other hand, there has been Law 462 on the reform of social security. This law endangers the \$9 billion reserves of the Caja de Seguro Social, which in Panama manages the medical care of almost all of the country's residents as well as retirement and pensions. The management of 90% of these reserves will be entrusted to the Bank of Panama and the Caja de Ahorros de Panama, two public banks, but whose directors are subservient to Mulino and are authorized to subcontract this management to the private sector. And the management of the remaining 10% will be entrusted directly to the private sector. The law even stipulates that it is mandatory to buy US debt securities. In other words, they endanger the reserves of the Caja de Seguro Social.

This law also reduces the pension from 60% to 30% and raises the minimum age. According to calculations by economists at the University of Panama, instead of retirement at 62 for men and 57 for women, people will now have to work until 80 to earn 60% of their salary, otherwise they will only receive 30% or less. This set off alarm bells, the Alianza Pueblo Unido por la Vida and other popular organizations denounced this situation, and responded to the president's invitation to participate in round tables at the presidency, without effect because the president refused to negotiate. During the Assembly's examination of the law, a consultation, broadcast on television, was organised and lasted about two months. Of the 500 people, the absolute majority were of the opinion that the system of solidarity should be completely restored, measures should be taken against tax evasion by employers, by the bourgeoisie, and also a high tax rate should be guaranteed so that those who earn the most, those who have the most profits, are those who contribute the most, because capital in this country is practically exempt from taxes.

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But to this was added an element that exploded the situation. The United States proposed, according to Trump, to regain control of the canal that had been ceded to Panama by international treaties 25 years ago, at the beginning of this century. The Mulino government, instead of denouncing this act to the UN Security Council, signed a memorandum of understanding with Pete Hegseth, the US Secretary of Defense, authorizing the installation of three military bases in Panama, on its former sites, and Hegseth declared that there were already a thousand soldiers in Panama. This presence of US troops is a violation of the Torrijos-Carter Treaty. This is seen by the people as a capitulation on the part of the Mulino government.

Added to this is the intention to reopen the First Quantum mine, which has brought the company 48% of its global profits and was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Justice in 2023, after impressive mobilizations. A mega-march brought together a quarter of a million people in a country of 4,300,000 inhabitants. On the same day, one million people mobilized throughout the country. This level of mobilization forced the Supreme Court to declare unconstitutional, not only the mining agreement, but also, due to an ecological problem of environmental protection, open-pit mining. This did not prevent the president from declaring that he is going to reopen the mine, to release for First Quantum the millions of dollars of copper that they had stored in the mine. In addition, a cargo of coal has just arrived at the mine's port to resume using the power generation site, an effective step towards reopening the mine.

These events are in total contradiction with the spirit of 2023 and are the main demands of the mobilization that began with the teachers on the 23rd, followed by the banana factory unions and the construction unions on the 28th. Today, after 54 days of teachers' strike, the banana growers reached an agreement with the Chamber of Deputies to establish a law that would restore the rights they had and that had been called into question by the reform of Law 462. But as entire communities were mobilized, the province was effectively under the control of the union and the communities. 24 roadblocks controlled the access roads. The president gave the order last Thursday (12 June) to advance militarily against the province, and on Friday, June 13, Operation Omega ("to the end") entered the province, confronting the groups defending the dams, mainly groups of the indigenous Noé, Bulé and Nazo peoples and the banana workers who have resumed the struggle. The main leader of the Banana Workers' Union, Francisco Espín, and 3 others were arrested, accused of glorifying crime.

The struggle intensified. Clashes have taken place throughout the province of Bocas del Toro, against the police, against the riot police and against the National Border Service – which legally should not be used in an internal police operation. Similarly, the indigenous peoples of Noé have blocked the Inter-American Highway, the most important in the country, and are fighting against the police. This also happened last week in a village called Arimey of the Emberá indigenous people, which is on the other side of the border that separates the provinces of Bocas del Toro and Chiriquí, close to Costa Rica. And now in the province of Darín, where the Emberá who fought to defend their roadblock live, two of their traditional leaders have been arrested and paraded shackled at the wrists and legs, like criminals. They were brought before the adversarial penal system on Friday, June 13 and released, in view of the absence of charges.

The other indigenous peoples, the Kuna, the Dule, expelled all government authorities in their region and closed all schools in support of the teachers' strike. They know that if this struggle is lost, the mine will be immediately reopened and the memorandum of understanding with the United States will be validated.

In the Panamanian constitution, everything concerning the canal or its adjacent areas must be submitted to the Chamber of Deputies and, if approved, submitted to a referendum. The government refuses to do so. In other words, this government has ceased to be a government of bourgeois representative democracy and has become a government that ignores the constitution and the laws, typical of far-right governments and governments that are civil dictatorships. We are therefore facing a struggle in which the question of defending the rule of law and democratic freedoms is at the forefront.

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The general secretary of Suntracs was forced, in accordance with a decision taken by the union, to take refuge in the Bolivian embassy, because they were going to arrest him, put him in the most dangerous prison in the country. Just like the comrades who are leaders of the indigenous peoples of Arimay, in Berán, who are in Mega Joya prison, are in danger, as is Jaime Caballero, a Suntracs leader, who is also incarcerated in Mega Joya. In other words, they criminalize protests, even student protests. The salaries of 22,000 teachers have been suspended. Many others are on strike.

There are mobilizations every day. Teachers, construction workers and other union sectors are mobilizing and traveling through communities. The strike is even stronger in the interior of the country than in Panama City, because Panama City has two million inhabitants, it is a very large geographical extension. Inside the country, the entire population joined the teachers and the marches.

In Latin America, we are experiencing a wave of far-right authoritarian governments that have implemented a whole program of neoliberal counter-reforms. Panama is in a different situation, as its governments have failed to implement their programme as a whole. What is the reason for this? Is Panama the weak link in Latin American capitalism?

In Panama, the reformist leaderships of the mass movement do not have the same strength as in other countries. We have leaders involved in the struggles such as those of the construction union, the Association of Teachers of the Republic or the teachers' unions. Panama is going through what we call a crisis of legitimacy: in 2019 there were elections, a few months later the government tried to impose constitutional reforms, and one of those reforms was to cut the budget of public universities. The next day 10,000 students took to the streets, invaded and occupied the Assembly, which returned to this aspect of the reform. Ten days later, a rally of 4,000 young people, including LGBT+ movements, trade unionists and young academics, was repressed by the police and marked the beginning of a little more than a month of mobilizations by young people, mainly women, aged 17 to 35, against the reform and against the parliament. This fight forced the government to go back on the entire constitutional reform in 2019.

The pandemic came in 2020, we were in lockdown in 2020-2021, but in 2022 there was an increase in the price of gasoline that pushed people to participate in blockades throughout the country against rising fuel prices, rising food prices, lack and high cost of medicines, and low budgets for education. The only thing that was achieved was an increase in the education budget and a brake on the rise in the price of gasoline, but the other issues remained unresolved, and the teachers' strike resulted in an agreement to end the salary cuts. In 2023, the situation exploded, because the previous objectives had not been achieved, and because the mining company First Quantum channelled the accumulated discontent, bringing together 250 people. There is a distance between the population and the traditional politicians, and there is a problem of legitimacy: people say no, we will not let it happen.

In reality, from the Alianza Pueblo Unido por la Vida the idea is that we are a catalyst for the population to express itself. There are leaders ready to fight, a teachers' movement whose vanguard has been fighting for 20 or 25 years. It is therefore a vanguard with a tradition of struggle.

But the repression is so strong that there has not yet been a widespread social uprising. The government's policy, whether there are struggles or not, is to repress: if a neighbourhood asks for water or has housing problems and so on. This causes fear, but it also accumulates discontent for a widespread explosion.

Unlike Brazil, where Bolsonaro has capitalized on the discontent of part of the population, Panama's far-right government has no social base. Martinelli is now under attack because it is said that it is because of him that we have Mulino. Martinelli, who has a social base of support and sympathy among the population, is starting to have this kind of problem.

The teachers' strike has broad popular support in neighbourhoods, cities, and families. Apart from teachers, construction workers, banana workers, indigenous people, as well as isolated individuals, their communities are very involved in the strike. There are community support campaigns, which bring food, money to support them in their struggle?

That's right. Towards the third week of the teachers' strike, a wave of assemblies and meetings of mothers and fathers began. Especially mothers. So, they got together and said that their school supported the teachers who are unemployed. And if there were teachers who didn't go on strike, parents said they wouldn't send their children to school. So, this is a strike that started with maybe 60% of the teacher on strike. Then, in the third week, that number rose to 80%.

From the first week, high school students, in uniform, participated en masse in the demonstrations in the provinces. We are witnessing the awakening of an actor which had been repressed during the Noriega era. The role that teachers play today was once played by high school students. They had a student federation that had associations in each school. Each class had a representation. There was an organized structure and mass mobilizations. Noriega ended it in 1985. He expelled the leaders and destroyed the organization.

We are considering the possibility of continuing the strike until 2 July, when the Assembly resumes its work. There is a nationwide picket movement in front of the homes of MPs who voted in favour of the law. Several MPs already fear for their electoral future and say they are ready to consider certain changes, certain reforms of the law as such.

How long can the movement last? Do you think it is possible to demand that MPs reform the law?

Waiting until July is the government's tactic to exhaust the movement, with the threat of cutting wages. This has already been done for about twenty thousand teachers. In addition, there are entire provinces where the school principals have not been paid. In Veraguas, in Bocas del Toro. Some of our colleagues have not been paid for three fortnights, others for two fortnights, others for one. In addition, the government is laying off workers en masse and replacing them with unemployed educators. This has been challenged in the Supreme Court as these dismissals are illegal. Appeals have been lodged with the Supreme Court. If our appeal is taken into account, there would be a contraction between the executive and the Supreme Court. This is part of the motivation to remain on strike, to force the Supreme Court to rule and force the restitution of wages. It would be a hard blow for the government.

There have only been two times in history when teachers have had their salaries cut during a strike. They are doing this because the goal of this far-right government is to destroy the Suntracs and destroy the teachers' organization. It thinks in this way to destroy the leadership that is standing in the way of his plan. We are therefore in a total confrontation, where there is no possible compromise.

We're at an impasse, aren't we? The government does not have the strength to crush the movement, to impose the pension reform, to impose the agreement with the USA, to impose the reopening of the mine, and the movement...

This is true, and the movement is not strong enough to defeat the government. We need greater impetus from the communities. Mulino was welcomed as a saviour by the financial oligarchy. But the situation of ungovernability also affects its profits. Consumption has decreased. The fact that 20,000 teachers are not receiving their salaries means that bank and mortgage loans are not being repaid to the banks.

This creates a difficult economic situation. If the situation worsens, if the population mobilizes even more strongly, there will be a spectacular defeat for the government. Of the magnitude of the one they want to inflict on us.

Is the bourgeois part of the real economy that derives its profits from tourism, from physical markets, already putting pressure on the government to back down?

Last week, ten days ago, he met with them, spoke to them and asked them to wait, to give him a few days to end the movement. That's why the president's speech is to say that there is no problem, that Bill 462 has passed... And people say, "My God, there are two Panamas here, the president's and the one you see on the street."

What we have not yet achieved is a simultaneous national revolt. And I am even talking about the people's right to demonstrate. There have been protests that have relatively paralyzed the country, but not everywhere, as happened in 2023. And this is what the president says: I will not allow the country to be closed again.

There is also an international solidarity movement, and we are deeply grateful to all our comrades in Brazil and all the other countries who led the international campaign that began before Monday, 9 June.

There have been demonstrations at the International Labour Organization, at the congress of the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas, at the International Trade Union Confederation. There were even coordinated actions on 9 June in different countries, both in Latin America and in Europe and elsewhere. [1] In other words, there was indeed a movement of teachers' unions, left-wing political organizations, comrades of the Fourth International and so on.

At the heart of this is solidarity with Suntracs, which is the most affected organisation. Its accounts, its union dues, have been seized by two consecutive governments since 18 November 2023. Its most important leader had to take refuge in the Bolivian embassy. Another important leader is in prison. And another is targeted by a reward of 10,000 dollars for his location alone! A manhunt is underway. The union's premises were invaded. In other words, the whole issue of freedom of association and the ILO agreements have been violated.

Of all the government's attempts to crush the movement, one of them almost succeeded, and that was the attempt to negotiate with the banana union to reform the social security law. There were at least two attempts. One of them was that of a government minister who met with them in Boca del Toro and returned without an agreement. And now there has been a new attempt that has resulted in the arrest of the union leader, right? In other words, the government's attempts to divide the movement have not worked. So, what will happen now?

The Assembly of Deputies approved the reforms agreed with the union in Bill 45. Despite this, they have maintained the strike in Changuinola, which is the area where the union is strongest.

The president then decided to send the police and militarized forces to the scene, the clashes began, and the trade unionists closed Changuinola again. The government wants to crush the movement. But as the movement is very strong, the slightest misstep can set off the powder keg. And we are resisting precisely so that the people can participate, and we can defeat the government.

Defeating the government means defeating, as you rightly said, not only the Social Security Reform Act, but also mining, all these government attempts. In addition, the government itself is putting itself in danger, because this is a president who does not have a vice president. And he is in danger, for example, with the complaint that we filed against him in the Assembly of Deputies, in accordance with the constitution of Panama, according to which he violated the international personality of the state by approving US military bases in Panama.

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This violation of the constitution is the only valid reason to impeach a president. If the balance of power were to change and a major crisis broke out, it would be possible for the president to be impeached and for new elections to be held within five months, as provided for in the constitution. In other words, it would open up a different situation.

This is not yet on the agenda. This is not a possibility at the moment, but it shows the way to a defeat of the government that would have become an ineffective instrument for the bourgeoisie, a government that is absolutely defeated.

27 June 2025

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from the French translation in [Inprecor](#).

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[1] Marcelo Di Stefano, leader of the CSA who comes from the Argentine CGT, contributed to this. There were several actions around 9 June, in Brazil in front of the embassy and at the consulates in Rio and Santos. A Belgian trade union delegation accompanied by MEPs, including LFI, went to the embassy in Brussels and so on.