

Colombia Protests an Example of "Neoliberal" Backlash

On June 8, tens of thousands of teachers, state workers, and students in Colombia protested budget reforms mandated in agreements between their government and the International Monetary Fund. The demonstrators oppose a law moving through the Colombian Congress that would control the growth of federal outlays to states and municipalities. The law is similar to measures that provoked rioting and other civil disobedience in Argentina several times over the last few years. Such reactions to IMF stability programs are feeding anti-US sentiment and opposition to the FTAA.

According to Gloria Ramírez, president of the Colombian Federation of Teachers, the protests were not only against the controversial budget cuts but also against the entire "neoliberal model" being imposed on the country from abroad. About 300,000 teachers and 125,000 public health workers have been on strike or participating in work slowdowns since last month to protest the measure, which is being enacted as part of deficit-cutting agreed to in return for loans from the IMF.

Marches in the capital and most major cities Thursday were largely peaceful. However, hooded youths bashed in windows at some businesses in Bogotá and police and demonstrators were injured when riot police cleared a blocked highway in the northeastern city of Bucaramanga. Highways were blocked in at least three states, including Norte de Santander, Cauca and Valle. On Thursday, police stationed riot units and armored vehicles with water cannons around the capital and dispatched helicopters over the city to deter violence. Bogotá banned liquor sales indefinitely and the carrying of weapons until Monday.