
Panama: Worker, Indigenous, and Popular Uprising in Bocas del Toro

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The Regional Context: Exclusion, Poverty, and Inequality

The past 30 years of history in Central America show political instability ranging from explosive situations to apparent calm. This regional instability is driven by the productive, political, economic, and cultural changes that have transformed Central American societies. The most difficult political processes took place throughout the 1980s, resulting in civil wars in several countries. All of them, with the exception of Costa Rica, were governed by authoritarian regimes. Peace accords were signed in the early 1990s, giving rise to formal democratization processes (Almeida 2014), but leaving the causes of the conflicts untouched: immense social exclusion, generalized poverty, and inequality. This initiated a phase of relative political stability and economic reactivation with little impact on social welfare, to the point that Central America is one of the regions with the greatest inequality in the world.

At the end of the first decade of the new century, there are few mechanisms in place for redistribution of the wealth generated and democratic systems continue to be very fragile. In addition to

poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, Central America faces enormous problems of environmental vulnerability (see Chaps. 1, 17, and 18 in this volume). As early as 1999, the Report on the State of the Region¹ pointed out the precarious nature of the economic and political advances. Ten years later, we can see that the same weaknesses continue to prevail, and are even worse with the return of the coup d'état as a mechanism for resolving political disputes.

The new century began with a steep decline in economic growth in almost all countries as a result of the slowdown in global economic activity, less expansion in world trade, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and factors specific to each country. Given that the USA is the primary destination for trade from Central America, the fluctuations in the US economy caused an immediate and palpable impact in the region. The first decade of the century came to a close with the consequences of the global capitalist crisis being felt in the Central American economies, which again demonstrates the dependence of the isthmus on the US economy.

While there are differences between individual countries, the dominant economic model is one that increases poverty, widens the social gap, increases unemployment and informal labor, imposes labor flexibility, and deregulation of labor

This chapter was translated from Spanish to English by Nancy Hand.

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¹ See State of the Nation (1999) *State of the Region in sustainable human development*. State of the Nation Project. Costa Rica.

relations. Economic growth is unstable and does not foster social development. Poverty primarily impacts children and households headed by women, and continues to be especially predominant in rural areas. Poverty is also extremely concentrated in border regions, indigenous and coastal territories, and densely populated urban zones.

Decades ago, the issue of political and economic integration was placed on the agendas of governments, with no great progress. The advent of neoliberal policies beginning in the 1980s favored free trade, but with no effort toward integration. This strategic objective is now regaining momentum, spurred by the negotiations and signing of free trade agreements with the USA and the European Union.² But the biggest barrier to integration continues to be the unequal and combined development of the countries and their subregions, which is reflected in enormous disparities. The obstacles to integration and inclusive development are found in enormous differences in human development, contrasts between the rural and the urban sectors, disparities between modern enclaves in the capital cities that exist alongside vast expanses of poverty and low productivity in the same cities, but especially in rural and border areas. In almost all of the countries, the Caribbean region remains disconnected from the Pacific region, despite it being extensive and very rich in biodiversity, natural resources, and culture. The inequalities between different social groups are alarming and have excluded the majority from access to social services and the benefits of development—gaps between rich and poor, between men and women, between indigenous people, Afro-Caribbean people and non-indigenous.

A brief review of the situation of the region, in very broad strokes, makes clear that despite improvements in macroeconomic indicators, the implementation of mechanisms for redistribution of socially produced wealth in order to improve

the standard of living for the great majority of Central Americans is still pending. The fragility of the democratization process in several countries, the existing political polarization, and the models of accumulation chosen by the governments portend difficult years ahead on the road to building inclusive and more democratic societies.

Labor Flexibility Sets the Tone

Policies aimed at undermining labor rights and weakening labor union organizations are at the core of the conflict discussed in this chapter that took place in the province of Bocas del Toro (Panama). The passage of a law that, among other things, was perceived as an assault on the rights of the Panamanian working class triggered the crisis that will be examined below. In a series of specialized publications, the NGO ASEPROLA³ and its allied organizations, have been systematically documenting and denouncing labor flexibilization practices and violations of labor rights in Central America. Labor flexibilization strategies are aimed at avoiding compliance with labor rights in the context of the prevailing model of economic liberalization, as a competitive advantage (increasing profit margins) for companies based on reducing social and labor guarantees for the working class.

Following the same neoliberal logic of reducing or eliminating any regulations considered barriers to the free functioning of the market, labor flexibilization is aimed at minimizing or eliminating laws created to protect the rights of working people. Labor protections and collective bargaining are considered obstacles by elites to the economic development of the region. This flexibility is two-pronged. One part is based on legal reforms, and the other—the most common and widespread throughout the region—is based on *de facto* flexibility. Such reductions in previously gained rights of labor unions involve both national and international laws. Research under-

² Panama and Belize have not been parties to these agreements.

³ Association of Services for the Promotion of Labor.

taken by ASEPROLA and the Regional Campaign against Labor Flexibility demonstrates the prevalence of six strategies for flexibilization:⁴

1. *Flexibilization of labor contracts*: is the primary strategy for violating labor rights, it is implemented through subcontracting, outsourcing, generalization of professional services (disguised labor relationship) and work at home practices.
2. *Flexibilization strategies that violate the right of working persons to stable employment*: are implemented through changes in company name, annual indemnification of the workforce, minimization of seniority of the working class, sudden closures of companies that reopen with new names, temporary contracts, dismissal after the probationary period, simultaneous registration of several firms in one workplace, massive unjustified layoffs alleging financial problems, and absence of contracts in writing.
3. *Flexibilization strategies that violate the right of working persons to a limited work day*: consists of the illegal extension of the work day every day of the week, sometimes without payment for overtime. Equating of split shifts and night shifts with day shifts. Accounting of hours by the week (4×3 or 4×4) rather than by the day, without payment for overtime. Elimination of breaks. Contracts by production goals rather than by work shifts. Work overloading and a policy of not hiring replacements for disabilities, vacations, and dismissals. Combining multiple functions.
4. *Flexibilization strategies that violate the right of working persons to a fair wage*: operates by way of extension of the work day without payment for overtime. Payment by production targets. Weekly, biweekly, or monthly production bonuses contingent on meeting daily production targets. Late payment of wages

without paying interest. Outsourcing, through which the outsourced company keeps a portion of wages.

5. *Flexibilization strategies that violate the right of working persons to medical/health care and social security*: late payment or failure to pay medical social security. Change of company name in order to avoid claims. In outsource companies, failure to pay medical social security is common. Illegal deductions from disabled persons or those on maternity leave. Company medical personnel sometimes cover-up failure to pay medical social security because of a reduction in workers seeking care from medical social security facilities.
6. *Flexibilization strategies that violate the right of working persons to form labor unions*: implemented by way of direct violation of the right to union organizing or through persecution of union leaders. Dismissal of union leadership, harassment of union leaders, and members.

All of these practices violate social and labor rights, in addition to violating legal regulations and human rights established in a number of international conventions. Despite these clear violations, the agencies responsible for enforcing these rights implement a policy of impunity that benefits the business sector. These flexibilization strategies are widespread throughout Central America, but there are few sanctions, which demonstrate the complacency of the responsible authorities. The extreme has been the selective murder of union leaders in several countries, particularly Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama.

Background on the Bocas del Toro Uprising

The events that took place in Panama in July of 2010 have their proximate antecedents in the popular discontent caused by the lack of mechanisms for redistribution of socially produced wealth. The energetic growth of the Panamanian economy is clear: Gross Domestic Product (GDP) went

⁴ See Regional Campaign Against Labor Flexibility (2010) *Lobar flexibility violates labor rights in Central America, trends and cases*. Regional Campaign Against Labor Flexibility. Costa Rica.

from 23 billion dollars in 2004 to 42 billion dollars in 2008. Economic growth reached 10.7% in 2008, in a sustained upsurge starting in 2004. The lowest growth rate of this period was 7.5% (2004). This vigorous growth did not translate into improvements in the quality of life for the vast majority. While there was talk of an official unemployment rate of 5.2% in 2008, hidden behind this figure was enormous concealed unemployment, with an informal sector that has an immediate visual impact in the major cities and that represents 45% of jobs. As a dollarized economy, the inflation rate in 2008 reached 8.7%, the highest since the 1970s. The dance of the millions generated by the transportation economy of the Panama Canal,⁵ was increasingly concentrated in a smaller and smaller privileged group, to the point that Panama is among the three countries with the most extreme distortions in the distribution of wealth in Latin America. While per capita GDP was US \$ 10,000 in 2009, the majority of Panamanians do not benefit from the recent economic bonanza. In fact, the Gini coefficient was 56.4 in 2007, very close to those of Zimbabwe (56.8), Brazil (56.7) and higher than that of Nicaragua (55.1) and Honduras (55.0), respectively.

With barely 3.5 million inhabitants and an impressive economic growth rate, Panama has a shameful poverty rate of nearly 30% at the national level and 47% in rural areas.⁶ The indigenous population totals about 200,000 inhabitants, and extreme poverty covers over 90% of their territory according to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates. It is the country in Latin America with the highest number of people jailed without trial. The social contrasts in Panama are extreme. There is an abundance of liquid capital in circulation, and an ostentatious bourgeoisie that displays a first world lifestyle. For purposes of comparison, daily life for the majority is characterized by communities in metropolitan areas without access to water, public schools in poor condition, a collapsed public transporta-

tion system, low wages that are not enough for the basic food basket, widespread informal, an overwhelmed medical and health care system, and heightened levels of social and criminal violence.

The Crisis of Bipartisanship and Government by Business

With 73% electoral participation, Ricardo Martinelli and his Democratic Change Party handily won the elections conducted in May, 2009 with 60% of the votes compared to 37% obtained by his opponent, Balbina Herrera, the Pérez Balladares (PRD) candidate. The large number of votes received by Martinelli can be explained primarily as a vote of punishment by the Panamanian people against the PRD and the shared bipartisanship with the different fractions of the Panameñista Party.⁷ The voters expressed their discontent over the suffocating social inequality created by the neoliberal policies that have been implemented by each successive government since the military invasion by the USA in 1989 that ousted General Manuel Noriega. This discontent has been channeled into an alternative provided by economic elites (that is presented as the Democratic Change Party) that is the result of a divided left,⁸ and by the difficulty of an important sector with influence over the popular classes to overcome barriers to build an anti-neoliberal alternative.⁹

The Martinelli government, which took office on July 1, 2009, is made up of businessmen, of their trusted employees from the private sector and by other conservative sectors such as Opus Dei, which occupied strategic posts in the ad-

⁵ The tertiary sector, historically tied to the transit route, employs two thirds of the working population.

⁶ ECLAC (2008) *ECLAC Statistical Yearbook*. Chile.

⁷ The Panameñista Party returned to executive power in the May 2014 presidential elections, but the Democratic Change Party continues to hold the most seats in the National Assembly.

⁸ A sector of the left proposed the economist Juan Jované as an unaffiliated candidate, but the Electoral Tribunal rejected the candidacy. Three days prior to the elections, the Supreme Court of Justice ruled in favor of Jované, but it was by then too late for him to be included on the ballot.

⁹ Partido Alternativa Popular (2009) *Election Results*. Internet. Panama.

ministration. A brief family portrait would yield a picture of a Martinelli who graduated from a military academy in the USA and from INCAE; a vice president, education minister, and a foreign minister who are Opus Dei activists. The honeymoon between civil society and the new government would not last long. The social movement events of July 2010 are rooted in the historic discontent of the great majority of Panamanians, now disillusioned by the failure to deliver on promises for change put forth by the Democratic Change Party and President Martinelli who had already been part of the government of PRD and of the cabinet of Mireya Moscoso (Panameñista Party).¹⁰

The Social Movements Do Not Let Up

Neither the high electoral turnout nor the honeymoon between the new government and the people, demonstrated by the initial opinion polls, was able to squelch the sustained popular discontent, expressed through countless struggles throughout the Republic of Panama. It would be impossible to give a detailed account or a lengthy analysis in this venue. However, some of the most significant aspects will be highlighted, by way of prefatory explanation of the social explosion that took place in the province of Bocas del Toro, and later spread to the main urban centers.

The high cost of living, poverty wages, extremely poor roads, predatory tourism, mining and damn projects, lack of access to water, underfunded public transportation, the prevalence of child labor, lack of public safety, deteriorating infrastructure and content of public education, neglected public health services, labor flexibilization, the invasion of companies and colonists in indigenous territories, and the effects of the global financial crisis provide a glimpse of that other excluded Panama that is hidden behind

the skyscrapers, casinos, and upscale restaurants where exclusive elites and beneficiaries of the prevailing neoliberal model reside.

A shared characteristic of the social movements of the Central American region is the explosiveness of the methods of struggle. Governments have demonstrated to the social organizations that the only way to be heard is to resort to road blocks, strikes, and public demonstrations. Legal means and petitions have continued to be used alongside more nonconventional protests, but impunity continues to be the rule for offenses committed by politicians, businesspeople, and transnational companies. The political regime has nullified the separation of powers, which is the foundation of liberal democracy. The party in power has control of the executive, legislative and, judicial branches, as well as the comptroller.

The defense of business interests in order to implement labor flexibilization,¹¹ has resulted in serious conflicts with the working class and other groups over human rights violations. Of particular note is the confrontation with construction workers, who seek safe working conditions, among other demands, because of the frequent workplace deaths and accidents on construction sites. The response of the government has been avoidance, repression, arbitrary detention, and arrest warrants for labor leaders.¹²

Labor unions blame the Ministry of Labor for violating labor rights. After one year in office, the Democratic Change administration has not processed a single application by labor union organizations. Of the 19 requests submitted, it rejected 9 entirely arbitrarily. In less than 1 year in power, the *rabiblancos* ["white tails"]¹³ have violated labor rights and international agreements signed by Panama, the administration has eliminated

¹⁰ Vázquez, Priscilla (2009) *The Defeat of the PRD in the Elections Does Not Mean the End of Hunger Politics*. Internet. Panama.

¹¹ Gandásegui, Marco (2009) *Analysis of the Elections*. Internet. Panama.

¹² Labor leaders in the construction workers' union have also been killed at times during protest campaigns. These actions remain in impunity.

¹³ Panamanian popular slang for people from the dominant classes.

collective bargaining and “legalized” the “right” of the police to terminate demonstrations.

In addition, freedom of expression and information has been infringed. Beyond the media blockade based on state control and sweetheart relationships with the major media, a new extreme was reached with the jailing of journalist Carlos Jerónimo Núñez for alleged “libel and slander” against a landowner in Chiriquí Province, whom he denounced in several articles for environmental destruction. In a press release dated June 2, 2010, the organization Unidad de Lucha Integral del Pueblo (ULIP) and others, denounced the closure of radio and television programs with no explanation beyond “on orders from higher up.”

The Bocas del Toro Working Class Shows the Way

The events that took place in Bocas del Toro province during the month of July of 2010 can be categorized as a worker, popular, and indigenous uprising triggered by the struggle against Law 30 (the Chorizo Law), but that also expressed discontent built-up over a period of years. Social sectors such as environmentalists, *campesinos*, native peoples, and human rights advocates joined with the working class and their traditional methods of struggle. The mobilizations in the faraway province of Bocas del Toro and the general strike that spread to other areas of the country brought about a political crisis for the Martirelli administration, the magnitude of which was largely unforeseeable.

To say that the magnitude of the crisis was unforeseeable does not imply a failure to recognize the breeding ground that was generating popular discontent. But the pro-business government was preparing to celebrate its first year in power with high approval ratings in the polls. The political regime appeared to be solid, to the point that it decided to implement a new package of neoliberal measures through the national parliament, without calculating the resulting effects. During the 2 months prior to the crisis, the neo-

liberal government increased the sales tax from 5 to 7%, which directly affected the pocketbooks of consumers; it passed the Carcelazo Law (Jailhouse Law), which criminalized social protest; and most importantly it rushed the so-called “chorizo” law (Law 30) through the National Assembly, which sought, among other measures, to eliminate the labor bargaining.¹⁴ This law, also known as 9-in-1, hides changes to the Labor Code, the Penal Code, and Judicial rules behind the title of “Promotion of Commercial Aviation.” The new law gave the authority to make a declaration of national interest for projects that are destructive to the environment at the discretion of the Executive Branch, thereby avoiding environmental impact studies. As if that were not enough, this panoply of laws reformed the National Police law, creating new difficulties for citizens to be protected from the use of excessive force.

The whole set of measures imposed during the period prior to the Bocas del Toro uprising was aimed at infringing on citizen, economic, and social rights, and they placed the burden of the weight of the global economic crisis on the back of the working class, in addition to deepening the prevailing neoliberal model. There were protests and denouncements in the capital city, but it was in the Province of Bocas del Toro that the response of the popular sectors was the most militant and sustained.

Bocas del Toro: A Mix of Factors

It is worth asking why the most serious protest eruption took place in the remote province of Bocas del Toro. A document of the Alternative Popular Party includes an interesting reflection on the factors that led the banana workers to take the lead against the government’s package.¹⁵ In

¹⁴ It undermines the right to strike, eliminates deduction of union dues and creates a trade organization manipulated by the Ministry of Labor.

¹⁵ Alternative Popular Party (2010) *National Situation*. National Political Directorate. Internet. Panama.

the indigenous areas that are found on the isthmus of Panama, the extreme poverty rate is over 90%, the areas of Ngöbe—Buglé, Bri Bri, and Naso—Teribe, where the majority of the working class of banana workers of Bocas del Toro come from, are among the most affected by these conditions of indigence. Of the nearly 16,000 inhabitants of the province, 45% are indigenous people of the cultures mentioned above. Six of every ten people in Bocas del Toro are poor and four of every ten live in extreme poverty. Tourism operations increased in recent years, though they are largely limited to the island areas and have generated limited jobs that require a certain basic level of qualification, which the majority of the original inhabitants do not possess. The banana activity continues to be an important source of employment in vast areas of the province under the control of the transnational company, Chiquita Brands. As in all banana-producing areas, the company determines the pace of life in the region, with the protection and complacency of national and local authorities. The workers belong to SITRAIBANA, a representative union organization that is heir to a long tradition of struggle bringing together some 4000 workers, both men and women.¹⁶

Both poverty and inequality, along with the growing disillusionment with a new government that is furthering the same model of extraction and exclusion implemented by its predecessors, were the breeding ground for the incipient social explosion. The trigger was when the multinational banana company benefited from the government's new chorizo law in an attempt to debilitate the local labor union by refusing to collect and transfer union dues. The response of the workers was to call a 48-h strike. The company did not yield and the strike was declared open-ended during a banana worker mass meeting. The government, represented by the minister of labor, closed ranks with the company. The government

responded with a show of bravado, the Ministry of Security and the director of the police reportedly made public statements against original peoples that it was a movement of “a handful of drunken Indians” (HREV 2010).

The banana workers took to the streets and local communities came out in their support. The government sent nearly a thousand policemen to contain the strike and the popular demonstrations. July 7 and 8 marked the worker and popular uprising when violent and unjustified state repression was unleashed, leaving up to eight dead, including leader Antonio Smith, an affiliate of the National Convergence Central. Hundreds were injured, at least fifty seriously; those arrested by the security forces numbered in the hundreds. None of this repression in making the workers of Bocas del Toro surrender, which forced the government and the company to negotiate the suspension of the aspects of the chorizo law that violated union rights.

Brief Chronology of the Crisis

Below I present a brief chronology of the events that took place in early July, 2010 in Bocas del Toro. For more information, the work of the human rights organization, HREV¹⁷ is recommended, among other documents. In response to implementation of the chorizo law by the government and the banana company and in demand of a repeal of the articles harmful to labor, environmental, penal and repressive/police matters, the 48-h strike called by SITRAIBANA and four independent unions began on Friday, July 2, 2010. The events forced the extension of the strike on Sunday, July 11. Families and people from the communities joined the protest. The government responded by deploying the security forces. On July 2 and 3 there were demonstrations and blockades. On Saturday, July 3, the Bocas Fruit Company held back payment of wages, which

¹⁶ While the last major banana strike was during the 1960s, the union has maintained a tradition of the classic methods of the working class: union assemblies, company control, pickets, worker monitoring in nearby areas, etc.

¹⁷ Based on HREV (2010) *Report on Human Rights Violations in Changuinola. July 7 through 11, 2010*. Human Rights Everywhere. Panamá.

caused greater discontent. The protesters blocked the exit of the directors of the company in Plot 13 of the region.

In response to the authorities' unwillingness to negotiate and the retention of wages by the company, on July 4 the local banana workers declared the strike to be indefinite. On Monday, July 5, highway blockages increased, which isolated the city of Changuinola, which affected educational, commercial, and tourism activities. The government's sluggishness in responding to the crisis was such that it was not until Tuesday, July 6 that the minister of labor, Alma Cortés, arrived on the scene, but she did not reach an agreement with the strikers. Following the failure of the minister's mission, the national police intensified its repressive actions. The popular resistance continued on Wednesday July 7, despite the assault by police. Clashes with demonstrators spread and union leaders and community members were arrested. The workers demanded the presence of the president of the republic, who had to cancel his trip to the World Cup soccer play-offs, but did not go to Bocas del Toro. Instead, on Thursday, July 8 Martinelli, as chief of negotiations, sent the minister of the presidency, Jimmy Papadimitriou. As back-up, on July 9, Vice President Juan Carlos Varela, joined the delegation.¹⁸ Leaving a trail of repression (including deaths, serious injuries, and mass arrests), the strike ended on Sunday, July 11 with an agreement. An accord was reached to suspend the articles of Law 30 (the chorizo law) that the union groups were demanding over the prior 3 months.

Tally of Victims and Human Rights Violations

Human rights organizations, local NGOs, and community members maintain that the National Police used excessive force, shotguns with pellets, assault rifles, helicopters, tear gas, and they shot demonstrators in the face. One of the first victims was indigenous worker, Antonio Smith,

who received multiple pellet wounds to the face.¹⁹ A report prepared by the human rights organization, HREV,²⁰ reported the deaths of seven people. Antonio Smith and Virgilio Castillo died as a direct result of police actions; Rubén Becker and Leonardo Santos from respiratory complications attributable to the tear gas; Einar Quintero, Marcelina Carpintero, and Florinda Peña from events apparently related to the repression, according to local NGOs. At the time the report was finalized, Valentín Palacios had been detained and disappeared.

The document reports that at least 256 people were injured as a result of pellets fired; 61 of these cases were serious (58 to the eyes and 3 with internal injuries). Some of the injuries caused irreversible blindness. A detailed analysis of the bodily areas impacted by the pellets indicated that the majority of the victims sustained injuries above the belt, especially to the head, eyes, chest, back, and arms. Testimony collected by HREV (2010) denounced cases of torture, cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment by the National Police against those detained. The police also made arrests in hospitals or when the victims were seeking or coming from receiving medical care. Many were denied medical care despite serious injuries. The repressive forces reportedly used racist insults and insults of all kinds and they denied food and kept detainees from sleeping. Some prisoners were held incommunicado. The report includes details of other forms of degrading treatment, such as pointing a gun at a person's head while the person was handcuffed and on his/her knees; throwing vinegar on open wounds; use of pepper spray in the faces of detainees; spraying food with gasoline before serving it; and many people, including women, were stripped naked (HREV 2010).

¹⁸ Juan Carlos Varela won the presidency in May 2014.

¹⁹ Radio Temblor (2010). *Alert, Panama at War*. News report, July 9, 2010. Panama. Internet.

²⁰ HREV, op. cit.

Protest Spreads from Bocas del Toro

News of the popular uprising in Bocas del Toro was reported quickly, particularly in the informal media and through civil society organizations. In order to prevent news from spreading, the Police took control of the majority of public Internet access points. The private agencies and private media cautiously reported the events. What little reporting there was of the events presented them as just another protest by union groups. Costa Rican television stations focused on tourists from Costa Rica who were trapped in the province of the neighboring country, placing little importance on the magnitude of the social rebellion and even less on the police violence. The electronic social media became the primary tool of solidarity and information. Social media transmitted news and expressions of support. In some Central American cities, there were demonstrations in front of the Panamanian embassy, demanding that the Panamanian government end the repression. Television newscasts and print media in Central America ignored the actions in solidarity and continued giving very sparse information. However, political parties on the left, civil society, and union organizations in the region attempted to break the information blockade, using the means at their disposal.

The inspiring resistance of the people of Bocas del Toro and the ineptitude of the Democratic Change government in dealing with the situation garnered the sympathy of majority of the Panamanian people. The national union leadership, fearful at first and more concerned about their relative power, had no choice but to call for a general strike, which was partially observed, but with strong participation from key sectors. It is notable that the CTRP²¹ itself waited until July 9 to call a meeting of its Council of Delegates, despite the fact that SITRAIBANA is affiliated with this labor confederation. The insurgent strike in Bocas del Toro forced the leadership of CONATO,²² despite its denouncement against

the chorizo law, to take action and join in the call made by the independent faction, ULIP²³ to proclaim a general strike. Until that time, the leaders of CONATO had not even called a meeting of their Council of Delegates. The largest union organization in Panama, constituted by FRENADESO, held its own strikes and mass mobilizations independently.

ULIP convened a national meeting when the chorizo law was sent to the National Assembly of Representatives and it had a major role in the General Strike of Tuesday, July 13. The Union of Coca Cola workers heeded the call, and completely paralyzed the company, the teachers' union and the Construction Union;²⁴ the Authentic Federation of Workers mobilized important sectors, notably workers in the dairy processing company, La Estrella Azul and Cemento Panamá. In the rest of the country the strike was not effective, with the exception of Bocas del Toro, although there were protest marches.

A Partial, Fragile Victory

The response to the call to strike was very partial, but two relative political triumphs attributable to the Panamanian popular movements are noteworthy:²⁵ the entry onto the scene of industrial workers who had not mobilized in years and the halting of the antipopular offensive waged by the business government, which was obliged to postpone implementation of the so-called chorizo law and agree to a national commission to revise the legislation. Beyond the fact that the commission was a demobilizing factor and posed the danger of legitimizing the law, the government intended to implement it immediately to dismantle the union movement and eradicate resistance to its neoliberal policies. The government led by

²¹ Workers' Central of the Republic of de Panama.

²² National Council of Organized Workers.

²³ Unidad de Lucha Integral del Pueblo (United People's Struggle).

²⁴ SUNTRACS.

²⁵ Regarding popular movements see: Camacho, Daniel and Menjivar, Rafael (1989) *Los movimientos populares en América Latina*. Edit. Siglo XXI. México.

Martinelli received a short term setback (though it was not defeated). The neoliberal government experienced deteriorating popular support and paid a political cost for its clumsy handling of the crisis. The public opinion firm *Dichter y Neira*, with a poll conducted in early July showed a fall of 14% in President Martinelli's approval rating. Although it stayed above 50%, it reflects a sizeable reduction since it went down from the comfortable 80% level where it was prior. When asked if they would elect him president again, 60% said no,²⁶ "because he has not kept his campaign promises." To the foregoing must be added the rejection of the population of almost the entire cabinet, especially the Minister of Labor and the Minister of Security.

The new political context, created by the Bocas del Toro uprising and its associated protests in the rest of the country, did not deepen the crisis of government because on the streets in the middle of the confrontation, there were no visible alternatives with mass influence. The discontent due to the political-economic situation that the great majority of Panamanians live in is still lacking channels of organized political expression, perceived as an option (with the possibility of vying for power) that is different from the traditional parties. As Martinelli assumed the presidency by presenting himself as the alternative for change, some populist measures helped him solidify his image. But if economic growth does not result in improvements in the quality of life and well-being of the popular classes, the discontent will likely continue to exist. All indications are that the government aims at furthering the current trend toward concentration of wealth, which, along with the discredit and internal crisis of the PRD,²⁷ opens opportunities for an alternative from the Panamanian left, which has not managed to come together because of the sectari-

anism of some of its most important leaders (a trend which has continued through the May 2014 elections).

Nothing will be the same as before the Bocas del Toro revolt, but the government can recover its ability to maneuver to the extent the opposition allows it. The Panamanian social and popular movements were strengthened, but if they do not build their own political instruments and they remain in splintered struggles, there could be a constitutional reform intended to promote the reelection of Martinelli or other alternative businessmen.

Nor can we discount the deepening of the contradictions of the impromptu government alliance, stimulated by the need of the Panameñista Party to avoid discrediting itself. The coming popular struggles and mobilizations may widen those splits or, alternatively, the lack of unity and demobilization could have the effect of scarring over those wounds.

Space for a Popular Political Alternative

Years after the Bocas del Toro crisis, the repression committed during the uprising remained with impunity, while corruption is rampant and there is no separation of powers of the State. The government maintains support among the middle class and in the rural areas, the popular sectors remain discontented, but the lack of alternatives encourages a return to calm. The passage of time and the passivity of the opposition from the left have been the best allies of Martinelli, who continued to implement his economic plan. The PRD is not dead, but for now it has not recovered from its internal crisis and it continues to pay for it after many years of governing in the interests of large capital, which is the winner in the neoliberal model. The Panameñista Party is a member of the government and won the presidential elections in 2014. There remains an opportunity for the creation of an alternative political option—a visible one with influence of important segments of the worker and popular movements in the form of a broad front.

²⁶ Curiously, this information was removed from the Web site the second day the results were presented.

²⁷ Revolutionary Democratic Party, opposition force and primary component of the bitartisanship that has characterized the model of domination in Panama during the last 20 years.

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