

8-28-2003

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Hondurans Protest Privatizations." (2003). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9126>

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Hondurans Protest Privatizations

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Honduras

Published: 2003-08-28

The Honduran Congress, in a historic measure, passed legislation to privatize water services. The Servicio Autonomo Nacional de Acueductos y Alcantarillados (SANAA) will continue water distribution in the short term, but private businesses or municipalities will soon vie for concessions. The new Ley Marco del Agua Potable y Saneamiento authorizes SANAA to fire its public employees after paying them all indemnities to which they may be entitled. SANAA will then become an "advisory agency."

The dismembering of the agency is part of a privatization process demanded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in return for new infusions of money for the desperate nation (see NotiCen, 2003-06-12). The Bloque Popular, an organization of unions, educators, and medical personnel, immediately announced their opposition to the privatization, warning that rates will rise to levels that the poorest cannot pay.

On Aug. 18, the principal labor organizations of the country announced a schedule of protests. President of the Colegio de Profesores de Educacion Media (COPEM) Eulogio Chavez said there would be nationwide demonstrations in the hope of persuading President Ricardo Maduro to reconsider the measure. Chavez said that this law, and others like it, could only serve to worsen relations between the government and civil society. "The Maduro government has demonstrated that it is close to the powerful, and a thousand light-years from the poor sectors of this country, since he doesn't work to resolve the grave problems like poverty," Chavez said.

Professionals fight to keep wage gains

High on the protest agenda is the "Ley de Servicio Civil," another demand of the IMF, which, he said, calls for freezing salaries until 2006 and renders inoperative the teachers and doctors statutes, by which salaries of members of those professions are periodically reviewed. Also included on the protest agenda is the law against juvenile gangs (see other article, this edition), which Chavez called "fascist" since it "demonizes youth and leaves in impunity the white-collar criminals who plunder the coffers of the state."

On Aug. 26, it was as Chavez predicted. At least 15,000 people turned out to protest the perceived neoliberal onslaught. Twenty were injured and ten arrested in clashes with police. Damage was done to the Congreso Nacional, the Banco Central, City Hall, and other buildings. Press reports attributed the damage to the government's underestimation of turnout for the event, which its organizers called the "March for National Dignity."

Demonstrators began arriving in Tegucigalpa from points throughout the country at around 4:30 a.m. By rush hour, they had paralyzed city traffic, but kept the inconvenienced entertained with all manner of artistic presentations, folk dances, and songs. Miscalculation from government's belief

in its rhetoric President Maduro had appeared in the national media asking the people to avoid the protests.

But protest leader Carlos H. Reyes told the crowd, "Some time ago President Ricardo Maduro was promising us that there would be no rise in taxes, and he gave dozens or hundreds of interviews assuring us that there would be no more taxes, and then came a huge package, so, my brothers, if Maduro lied to us then, he's still lying to us now." After a raucous day of protest, the National Anthem was sung, and Reyes told the crowd, "We resist with dignity. The mobilization of thousands of people of different regions and organizations coming together in the Coordinadora Nacional de Resistencia Popular have deligitimized the so-called national dialogue convened by the government."

The proceedings came to a halt at that point, when groups whom leaders identified as government infiltrators began throwing Molotov cocktails and rocks at police. The police responded with tear gas and rubber bullets. Protest leaders restored calm, but new eruptions soon started, resulting in the damage to buildings. Reyes said, "I can guarantee you there are none of our people in this vandalism, these are police infiltrators who want to discredit this historic movement."

Said another leader, "Everyone could see that the leaders with megaphones called upon the people not to participate in this, but only groups of infiltrators would disobey the call of a leader of a movement."

Police spokesman Leonel Saucedo said that the police have a videotape of the people who caused the disturbances, and that "when we present them to the courts it will be known whether they were gang members or government infiltrators. I can assure you they weren't police."

In a written statement, the Coordinadora Nacional de Resistencia Popular held Maduro responsible for the violence, for having turned a deaf ear to the call to veto the Ley Marco de Agua and for having taken an "indifferent and hostile attitude toward their demands," instead of entering into dialogue with the leadership.

The Resistencia demanded that the president veto the Ley de Aguas, not approve the Ley de Servicio Civil, and not approve the Ley de Tierras.

-- End --