

Colombia: Medellín under Fire

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Despite two successful strikes in as many years, working in Colombia's public universities is tough. Last November, I [wrote](#) about a tide of social protest led by public school teachers and university students that became a nationwide general strike. The government and narco-paramilitaries responded with threats and repression, now rising even as the protests ebb. Alejandro Palacio, the student of mine who was getting death threats from rightwing paramilitaries, now works for the mayor of Bogotá, Claudia López. He still gets death threats, but if he avoids going on TV or radio, and stays in Bogotá with his bodyguards, he should be fine.

Medellín, however, is a crucible of narco-paramilitarism and state-sponsored terror, and the time between death threats and violent attacks is often brief, especially for such preferred targets as trade unionists. At the beginning of March, on the day that President Duque was in Washington addressing AIPAC about the dangers of Hizbullah in Venezuela, a pamphlet claiming to be from the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia - better known as the Clan del Golfo, the country's leading narco-paramilitary organisation, with a presence in 22 of Colombia's 32 departments - circulated at the University of Antioquia. The AGC immediately issued a denial.

The university is on strike because on 20 February, following orders from the mayor, Daniel Quintero, the riot police (ESMAD) entered the campus without prior authorisation from the university authorities. This is illegal, not to mention dangerous, and violates constitutional provisions for university autonomy. They said they were looking for homemade bombs, which only seem to be found in the backpacks of a handful of masked men who appear whenever ESMAD does, which is to say whenever a protest or demonstration is met with disproportionate force, i.e. more or less weekly.

The pamphlet claimed that the AGC had uncovered ties to armed insurgents within the university. Between 14 and 17 February, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) had carried out an 'armed strike' that left one electricity tower damaged. To call the ELN, or what remains of the FARC, a pale shadow of their [former selves](#) is an overstatement. The pamphlet, however, declared a need to 'free Colombia from the communist plague', and listed organisations and individuals to be 'exterminated'.

In the early hours of 5 March, an armed man entered Sara Fernández's home via the balcony, grabbed a knife from the kitchen, and stabbed her in the lung while she slept. Her screams woke the neighbours and alerted the private security guards, who caught the attacker as he fled. Fernández is the secretary of the Asociación de Profesores at the University of Antioquia, first on the pamphlet's list of targeted organisations. In 2013, she won the Women's Merit Award from the mayor's office for her research and activism on sexual and reproductive rights.

Fernández is one of the most important feminist trade union voices in the city, indeed the country; she is also my neighbour, and one of the few who welcomed me when I arrived in Medellín. From her hospital bed, she said that the attack can only be understood in the context of the assault on public higher education more broadly. Preliminary reports suggest that the assailant, an impoverished young man who was immediately arrested, was paid and directed by two others. If this wasn't the

work of the AGC - and the crime doesn't fit their m.o. - then who did it? Given state complicity in attacks on trade unionists in Colombia, it is unlikely that the intellectual authors will be apprehended. Estamos Listas, a feminist political movement formed last year to run candidates in the local elections, held a demonstration in front of the attorney general's office. There were candlelight vigils at the University of Antioquia, in our local park and in front of the mayor's office, all well attended.

ESMAD also had plans to enter the more genteel campus of the National University, where I work, on the afternoon of 4 March. Police helicopters circled overhead, ordering people to evacuate. But the vice-rector and the head of university well-being waded through rush-hour highway traffic to persuade ESMAD to cease and desist.

Outside a handful of public universities, social protest has receded since late January, but the country has been literally as well as metaphorically on fire. For the past week, the municipal government in Medellín has issued warnings of air toxicity and restricted traffic - the source of nearly 75 per cent of air pollution - to little effect. In Bogotá, fires were allegedly set by dissident factions of the FARC looking to plant coca crops in the Macarena National Park; as in the Amazon basin, where fires also rage, FARC dissidents gave National Park officials 48 hours to flee. In one national park along the Venezuelan border, the ELN recently murdered a park official for raising concerns about threats to the environment. In the metropolitan area of Medellín, as of 20 February, 132 fires had occurred since the beginning of the year, 93 of them requiring an emergency response, thus adding soot and ashes to the fine particulate matter with which the city's air is already saturated.

It is difficult to exaggerate the levels of terror and violence to which activists are subject in Colombia. In 2018, 126 trade union and social movement leaders were assassinated here, compared to 48 in Mexico, which has a population 2.5 times as large, and 23 in Brazil, which has more than four times as many people. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, whose representative the Duque government recently denied entry into Colombia, there were 36 massacres in 2019, with Antioquia, the department of which Medellín is the capital, in the lead. Across the country, attacks on human rights defenders were 50 per cent higher than in 2018, and the UN rebuked ESMAD for its violence against unarmed demonstrators, as well as police attacks on journalists and illegal searches of the homes of social movement leaders and activists.

The claim that the use of explosives in public universities is one of the city's main security issues is demonstrably false, and in the context of the very real armed conflicts raging in and around the city, represents a distraction at best. At worst, it points to the return of urban counter-insurgency in response to social protest. It is too early to say if this points to dark days ahead for the people fighting to make Colombian cities more humane, democratic and public, but I remain hopeful. We are unlikely to see a return to the vortex of the 1980s and 1990s, when public university teachers and students were murdered with impunity, nowhere more so than at the University of Antioquia, of which, alas, Quintero is an alumnus. Despite his relative youth (and the historical amnesia that accompanies it), he should know better, and if state and para-state violence against students and teachers escalates, Mayor Quintero and President Duque will be personally responsible.

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