

# Strike wave in Peru stokes ruling class fears of Chilean “contagion”

By Cesar Uco and Bill Van Auken  
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Amid the outbreak of a wave of strikes in Peru, the country’s ruling class is growing increasingly fearful that it is confronting “contagion” from the mass upheavals that have gripped three countries on its borders—Chile, Ecuador and Bolivia.

While Lima and its adjacent port city of Callao have been in the grip of Saturday’s Copa Libertadores football second final between Brazil’s Flamengo and Argentina’s River Plate, even that event has been held in the shadow of Latin America’s explosive social unrest. The match had to be moved to Lima at the last moment because the millions in the street made it impossible to hold in its originally planned location: Santiago, Chile.

Some 100,000 Peruvian healthcare workers entered the second day of an indefinite strike last Thursday, demanding that the government of President Martín Vizcarra take urgent measures to confront the country’s healthcare crisis, in which hospitals lack necessary resources to treat patients, including medicines prescribed by doctors.

In addition, workers are fighting for back pay and against a system that keeps many as part-time, temporary employees for up to 15 years.

Miguel Jimenez, a striking healthcare worker, told the WSWWS that the strikers are owed back wages that have not been paid since the beginning of last year, and they do not trust promises made by the health minister that they will be paid in January. He added that 6,000 cleaning workers had lost their right to full-time employment since 2013.

“If teachers go out on strike we should unite, just like in Chile,” he said “We are fighting for better living conditions that were promised to us but never delivered. Also the mining corridor in the south Andes should be part of the same struggle.”

Teachers unions have called walkouts to demand higher pay and an increased education budget. The minister of education has called the actions illegal.

Workers in Peru’s judicial system have also gone on an indefinite strike, which the government has also decreed illegal. And professors from public universities throughout

the country gathered in Lima last week to demonstrate for improved pay and conditions.

Today some 2,500 mini-bus drivers or *colectivos* are set to strike, demanding that the government grant them formal recognition and stop police persecution. The strike could tie up transportation into Lima from the so-called *conos*, the working class areas to the north and south of the city.

These strikes are taking place in the context of increasingly bitter struggles pitting peasant and farmer communities against the drive by the Vizcarra government to open up new areas of exploitation for transnational mining corporations. This has exploded recently with the Tia Maria mining conflict, but similar disputes continue, as in the Quellaveco mine in the province of Apurimac and the Tumicala mine in Moquegua, owned by the Anglo-American mining corporation.

Given the poor and deteriorating conditions confronting the working class and oppressed masses as a whole in Peru, the ruling establishment has ample reason to fear that it may be the next to face insurrectionary opposition.

These fears found expression in a column published last Friday by *La Republica*, Peru’s most influential daily, titled “Peru surrounded by flames.” Its author, Juan de la Puente, indicts a series of “lazy” analyses that have appeared in the media insisting that the events in Chile “have nothing to do with us,” that “we’re all right,” and which present some absolute difference between the developments in Peru and those in Chile, Ecuador and Bolivia.

“These events have more to do with us than it would appear, because they are both warnings posted on our door, because their effects already are present in Peru or because they signify an inevitable tendency of the national agendas in this part of the world,” he continues.

“The image of Peru as a peaceful country surrounded by a continent in flames is deceptive,” he adds.

Indeed, the ruling capitalist establishment in Peru is ill-prepared to confront the kind of mass upheavals that have developed on its doorsteps. For years, the country has confronted a deepening crisis of governability amid

unceasing exposures of massive corruption prevailing in every branch of government.

On September 30, President Vizcarra dissolved the congress—dominated by the right-wing *fujimorista* Fuerza Popular (FP) party—arguing that it was playing an obstructionist role. The action is under review by the high court, creating political uncertainty. While the closing of the congress was initially greeted with popular approval, Vizcarra's approval rating has since plummeted from a purported 79 percent to the latest poll showing 58 percent.

Vizcarra's approval rating stemmed in large measure from the fact that he is the only living Peruvian president who has not been indicted on corruption charges. Two former Lima mayors have also been charged, all of them in connection with the massive contracts-for-bribes scandal surrounding the Brazilian construction mega-corporation Odebrecht. Corruption in the judiciary system has also been exposed all the way up to the former chief judge Walter Ríos.

Peru, like Chile, was previously praised as a capitalist success story based on its rapid and stable economic growth. Between 2003 to 2016, it recorded an average annual GDP growth of 6.1 percent, the highest for Latin America, according to the World Bank.

Today, Peru, like Chile, is in economic decline, its earlier record GDP growth having vanished. Both countries are heavily dependent upon mineral production, which accounts for 60 percent of Peru's exports. Chile is the world's number one copper exporter, accounting for 28 percent of global supply, while Peru is second with 12 percent.

After 13 years of poverty reduction, the ranks of the poor are growing once again. While social inequality—the principal driving force for the eruptions in Chile—grew uninterrupted during the period of strong GDP growth, it is now deepening even further.

The effects upon the working class are shown graphically in the slashing of jobs in construction, previously one of the fastest growing sectors. According to the Federation of Civil Construction Workers of Peru, only 90,000 construction workers are currently on the payroll, just 16 percent of the 550,000 who obtained their card from the National Registry of Civil Construction Workers (RETCC).

However, the real figures are much worse. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Information (INEI), there are approximately 1 million workers in the industry.

Meanwhile the so-called informal sector still accounts for the overwhelming majority of employment, amounting to nearly 73 percent in 2016.

Also, in recent decades mining investments in the Andean countries have undergone a transformation, becoming increasingly capital intensive with the introduction of very large and expensive high productivity equipment. This has

left jobless both mineworkers and peasants who used to supplement their farming income by working in the mines.

In a desperate bid to reignite the economy, Peru's Central Bank has cut interest rates a second time this year, from 2.5 to 2.25 percent.

The mass upheavals on Peru's borders have taken the Peruvian pseudo-left by surprise and will push it further to the right. Instead of preparing for upheavals by the working class, they have been engaged in the attempt to cement rotten alliances with the bourgeois parties and politicians to secure for themselves a position in the next presidential elections to be held in 2021.

The most notorious of these operations involves the "left's" most prominent candidate, Veronika Mendoza, who has sought an alliance with Jehude Simon, a populist and former prime minister of the Aprista government of President Alan Garcia, who earlier this year shot himself to death as police were closing in to arrest him on corruption charges. Simon was prime minister when Garcia's government ordered the Bagua massacre, which saw bloody clashes between the Amazon Indians and the Peruvian police that left 34 people dead, including 23 policemen.

That the "flames" encircling Peru will ignite a Chilean-style explosion of the class struggle is not a matter of if, but only when. Peruvian workers must prepare by organizing themselves independently of and in opposition to the electoral machinations of the pseudo-left and the unions.

This requires above all the development of a new revolutionary leadership in the working class that assimilates the history of the International Committee of the Fourth International's (ICFI) fight for Trotskyism against Pabloite revisionism in Latin America and internationally.

*The author recommends:*

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