

Peru lifts quarantine restrictions as coronavirus infections pass 300,000 mark

By Cesar Uco
8 June 2020

On July 1, Peruvian President Martin Vizcarra initiated the third phase of a “targeted quarantine” to fight the COVID-19 epidemic. While the blanket quarantine has been lifted, including on Sundays, a 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew remains in effect. The new measures are called “targeted” because the quarantine remains in force in regions considered to be at high risk, while certain restrictions are continuing in Lima’s working-class neighborhoods.

As of July 6, the Ministry of Health (Minsa) had confirmed 302,718 infections and 10,589 deaths. The per capita death toll is huge. It represents half the number of fatalities reported by India, which has 42 times the population of Peru. It is also reported that of Peru’s 11,302 hospitalized COVID-19 patients 1,227 are in intensive care on mechanical ventilators.

In South America, Peru trails only Brazil in number of deaths, but ranks first in terms of fatalities per capita. This week Peru jumped to fifth place among the countries with the highest number of coronavirus infections.

Vizcarra is acting against the advice of many health experts, who have condemned lifting the quarantine as premature under conditions in which roughly 3,000 new infections are being reported daily and deaths continue to rise.

As a result of implementing the third phase of “targeted quarantine,” most businesses are now allowed to open their doors and most Peruvians can move freely, with certain exceptions in regions where the pandemic is growing, such as Arequipa, Ica, Junín, Huánuco, San Martín, Madre de Dios and Ancash.

In addition, people over 65 years of age are not allowed to leave their homes at any time. Another restriction is that young people, 14 and under, can go out for only half an hour and only 500 meters away from their homes.

The newspaper El Comercio reports that the capital’s 19 high-risk districts, where it is recommended that

young people under 14 years of age not be allowed to go out, coincide with the most populated and poorest of Lima’s 43 districts, with an estimated population of over 6 million. In short, the government is making a distinction, giving full freedom to capitalist interests and limited freedom to working-class neighborhoods.

More than 50 percent of those infected reside in Lima. With 10 million inhabitants, the capital comprises roughly a third of Peru’s population and consists predominantly of workers, the poor and immigrants who have poured in from every region of the country in search of better living standards.

Sunday, the first day of “targeted quarantine,” saw a record number taking to the streets, most of them ignoring social distancing rules. El Comercio reports that “markets [in particular], emporiums, malls and the beach registered a great agglomeration of people, despite the contagion and the recommendations of the Minsa.”

Measures banning large number of people gathering in the streets have been enforced mainly against workers, who are suffering the most from the pandemic, unable to feed their families and pay rent and utilities. The Vizcarra government executed more than 1,000 arrests in the first two days of phase three, all of them in working-class neighborhoods. To date, there have been 52,000 arrests for violations of government rules imposed to counter the spread of the coronavirus.

In terms of economic stagnation, the Ministry of Labor estimates that 1.2 million jobs were lost between February and May. But the daily Comercio speaks of 3.2 million people losing their jobs. The Peruvian central bank has estimated that the economy will contract by 12.5 percent this year.

The implementation of the “targeted quarantine” turned chaotic in Lima, with long lines of people waiting for buses, as a condition for resuming public transportation is that no one should travel standing. At rush hour the buses

are usually crowded with more people standing than sitting, packed like sardines.

A transport strike scheduled for Thursday was suspended at the last minute by Ricardo Pareja, representative of the Urban Transport Chamber. The drivers had expressed their disagreement with the government's measures. The public transport union of Lima and Callao staged a stoppage last week demanding economic compensation.

With the initiation of the "targeted quarantine," skirmishes with police forces took place in the popular markets of Mesa Redonda and La Parada. To enter these markets, vendors must show a permit that they have complied with the hygiene rules imposed by the Minsa. But in a country where three-quarters of the workers and markets like Mesa Redonda and La Parada are part of the informal sector there were a high number of small vendors without permits who were forcibly ejected by the police. Later, the same vendors would look for another way to enter the marketplace, arguing that "we also have to feed our families," before being evicted again.

These confrontations quickly gave way to police abuse. El Comercio reports that "a member of the Peruvian National Police slapped an alleged criminal twice during his interrogation at a police station in the district of El Agustino." A video of the interrogation began to circulate on social media, sparking outrage over police violence.

While anger is growing in the working class over unemployment, social inequality and state repression, Peru's ruling capitalist oligarchy is dissatisfied with the pace of the economic reopening. Speaking on behalf of big business, economist Elena Conterno, president of the Peruvian Institute of Entrepreneurial Action (IPAE), accused the government of hindering the normalization of economic activity. Writing in El Comercio she denounced the "cumbersome process through which companies have to go to get authorization for activating operations. This is because the firms have to present a protocol to the Health Ministry and a second one to the ministry in charge of their activities."

With many health experts expressing their opposition to lifting the quarantine, the IPAE declares the capitalist ruling elite's contempt for human life, which boils down to the insistence that profit is more important than the lives of workers.

This position was made clearer by Ricardo Márquez, president of the National Society of Industries (SNI), when he declared: "If the factory is in San Juan de Lurigancho [one of the largest poor working-class

districts with over 1 million inhabitants] they tell you that you cannot operate because it is located in one of the districts with the most cases of coronavirus."

His argument is that it is in an industrial zone and the fact that there is a high concentration of exposure to COVID-19 is inconsequential.

Meanwhile the crisis in the health care sector has reached alarming levels, with reports from all corners of the country calling for more equipment as well as showing high rates of infections and deaths among doctors, nurses and other health sector personnel.

What has been exposed is the lack of preparation of the state in regard to the health of the majority of the population. This is a result of the policies dictated by the International Monetary Fund and applauded by Latin American governments for cutting health care budgets in favor of encouraging the extractive sectors—mining for export—which benefit world capital and its junior partners in the Latin American bourgeoisie.

Given the alarming statistics of new infections and deaths, it is clear that President Vizcarra is a puppet of the Peruvian ruling class, which is looking with envy at how the capitalists in other countries are returning to "normality" at the expense of workers' lives and health.

A genuine struggle to defeat the pandemic, as well as the attacks of the bourgeoisie and its president, Vizcarra, can be begun only by the Peruvian working class forming rank-and-file committees in factories, mines and neighborhoods, independent of the unions and the so-called bourgeois left. Using social media and the internet these committees must fight to coordinate joint action with workers of the region and globally in a common struggle for socialism.

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