

At least 13 Peruvian youth killed in police raid on Lima disco

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A brutal police raid on a youth disco in Los Olivos, a populous working class and lower-middle-class district of Lima, Peru's capital, has left at least 13 young people dead, with another 23 under arrest.

The police launched the Saturday night operation against the Thomas Restobar discotheque, where approximately 120 youth had gathered. They moved in barely half an hour before the start of a night-time curfew that has been in place since March 16 in response to the country's devastating COVID-19 pandemic.

According to multiple witnesses, police fired both tear gas and live rounds into the crowded second-floor dance hall, prompting the panicked youth to flee down a narrow stairway at the bottom of which was a door that had been sealed, either by the club's owners, or the cops themselves.

A young man interviewed on television, and supported by neighbors who had gathered at the scene, told a television interviewer, "They didn't die from suffocation but from exposure to the tear gas fired by the police when they entered the place."

The young man added that the first thing the police did was "talk to the owners, [but] since they didn't agree, they fired the tear gas." The clear implication was that the cops and the owners had failed to agree on a bribe—commonly referred to in Peru as a *coima*—to allow the club to remain in operation.

We are "screwed by the *coima*," the young man continued. "A friend of mine died ... they've been killed like dogs."

A resident of the neighborhood confirmed the account given by the youth, telling RPP radio: "It appears that police entered and threw tear gas canisters at them, and boxed them in."

Nieves Cántaro, who had come to the Clínica Jesús

del Norte to identify the body of her 22-year-old daughter, also told RPP: "I know that they fired teargas grenades. In what kind of a mind would it occur to the police to do this? My daughter had just gone into the discotheque ... She was 22 and a university student. They took my daughter from me."

Unsurprisingly, the police exonerated themselves of any responsibility for the mass killing, claiming that they had fired neither teargas nor bullets during the operation. The official version of tragedy was given by Gen. Orlando Velasco Mujica, the commander of the Peruvian National Police, who declared that "those present tried to escape during the police operation, using a back door to the premises. However, the crowd prevented them from opening the exit door, causing the crowd to riot and suffocate."

The Peruvian media, echoed by their international counterparts, happily repeated this "official story."

The cops and the media also claimed that this was the first time they had received a call about the existence of a clandestine discotheque, when in reality the neighbors had been complaining for weeks. People on the scene after the tragedy asked the television reporters to film a poster on the wall of the building that read, "The best weekends," with pictures of young people dancing, making it clear that the parties were hardly hidden.

This operation, perhaps motivated in part by a failure of the cops to receive enough of a bribe, was also clearly organized to not only sow panic among those present, but to set an example for the wider population. The unit sent to the club was the so-called Green Squad, an elite paramilitary unit used in combating criminal gangs.

The contempt with which the government treated the lives of the young people was made grotesquely

evident when the truck with the bodies of the dead arrived at the morgue on Sunday afternoon. This meant that the 13 bodies had been piled up inside for almost 18 hours.

With nearly 600,00 reported coronavirus cases and almost 30,000 deaths, Peru has the worst per capita fatality rate in the Americas and is second only to Belgium worldwide. Even the Peruvian Ministry of Health acknowledges that the real death toll is far higher, allowing that it is probably 40,000 or more.

The right-wing government of President Martin Vizcarra had initially been credited, both within the Peruvian establishment and internationally, for imposing strict quarantines, beginning in March, in a bid to stop the spread of the pandemic.

Now, however, it is more than evident that this strategy has failed. Meanwhile, Peru's gross national product fell by 30 percent in the second quarter of this year, the worst decline in the country's history, bringing with it a massive destruction of jobs and increase in poverty.

Since early July, Vizcarra's crisis-ridden government has initiated a policy known as "Reactiva Perú" giving big business, and in particular the strategic transnational mining sector, a license to resume operations at the expense of the infection and deaths of large numbers of workers.

Meanwhile, the president's approval rating has plummeted, falling from 83 percent in June to barely 50 percent today.

The government's response to the tragedy in Los Olivos has been to vilify the owners of the club and those who were present, including the 13 dead.

There were extensive press reports on the fact that coronavirus tests were administered to those who were arrested at the scene of the disco massacre, and that 15 of the 23 had tested positive. This is hardly shocking given the government's own estimate that roughly 20 percent of Lima's population is infected. This is undoubtedly a vast underestimate, as Peru has conducted barely one-quarter of the tests carried out even in the United States.

The hypocrisy of this campaign was summed up in the statement of Rosario Sasieta, the minister for Women and Vulnerable Populations, who was dispatched to the scene of the tragedy to declare that she was "outraged" because "some businessmen who,

with a lust for profit, gathered 120 youth and, this lust, this avarice, has caused the deaths of these youth."

Who do they think they're kidding? No one in the Peruvian government will accuse the transnational mining companies of a "lust for profit" as miners are herded back to work, with thousands contracting the virus and many dying.

The gathering of 120 youths, ignoring calls for social distancing and the wearing of masks, and the desire for a small business owner to stay afloat by allowing them to dance, are no doubt antithetical to the social practices needed to combat the virus.

But on the scale of the poverty, immense social inequality and the genuine "lust for profit" on the part of Southern Copper Corp., Anglo-American, Rio Tinto, BHP Billiton and other transnational mining companies that have resumed operations, the party in Los Olivos is less than a drop in the bucket in terms of factors contributing to the spread of the coronavirus.

The wildly disproportionate violence unleashed against the youth present at the discotheque is emblematic of the turn by the Peruvian state and ruling class to reliance upon the military and police to suppress growing opposition within the working class.

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