

# A letter from Ecuador

23 January 2001

*The following letter was sent to the WSWs from a correspondent in Ecuador.*

We are on the eve of the anniversary of the coup that brought down President Mahuad last year. There is a lot of talk about a national strike tomorrow. I've also heard that people will be barred by the government from traveling in between provinces. I am limited by what I can understand here but I don't believe there is going to be a movement similar to last year.

Earlier this month the government raised transportation costs due to increases in fuel prices. I read there was heavy pressure by international financial interests to push ahead with this. The effects translated into an increase in bus fare for one person from 12 cents (US) to 20 cents—a considerable rise.

Protests began by students in Quito and other cities even before school was in session. Then a judge ruled that the price increases were illegal or unconstitutional. However, as I understand it, wage increases for bus drivers and other transportation workers were tied to this price increase. So a transport strike was launched in opposition to the judge's ruling against price increases. Whether this was carefully worked out to use the strike as the excuse to implement the measure is unclear (I recall that the generals used a mobilization of indigenous Quechuans to take over the congress as a cover for removing Mahuad).

At any rate, the judge's ruling was set aside and the price increases went through. There have been continual demonstrations, especially by junior and senior high school students with police presence. Some are "peaceful" while at others the police respond with tear gas. I almost got hit with a canister myself.

I've noticed statements in the press from military officials that they will not tolerate a repeat of what happened last year. Of course it was the military that was involved in the coup. This time around they are more worried about workers and students.

I really cannot say what might happen tomorrow or

how extensive the strike might be. It appears transport will be shut down. But my own inquiries tell me workers are more disgusted than preparing for a big struggle. I could be totally wrong, but several presidents have been run out of office without any improvement. Actually, with the ascendancy of each new president, things have gotten worse.

It appears that the students are at this point out front and a lack of perspective holds back the workers. We shall see.

The situation at the university is different than I have heard of elsewhere. Police are not allowed on the campus (at least in theory—not our theory). So every day students venture off the campus into the streets and throw rocks at the police. Then the police fire tear gas back at the students and they retreat back onto the campus.

The high school students mass themselves and try to take over intersections and barricade them with a tree or something like that against traffic and the police.

The media has up until now termed the police response "restrained." I have no idea how many are detained or injured.

But behind this lurk other developments. Plan Colombia threatens Ecuador from the north. The US has financed the building of an air force base in the port of Manta on the Pacific coast. This was done by Mahuad and there is a lot of complaining about it. The newspapers and politicians say that Ecuador got very little in exchange.

The base will launch the most sophisticated reconnaissance aircraft the United States has with the aim of wiping out cocaine and the narco-trafficking. I read reports where already Colombians are buying up land in Ecuador along the Colombian border for establishing coca processing plants.

Every day in Lago Agrio, a jungle town near the border that has hospitals where guerrillas and paramilitary right-wing forces recuperate, there are

gunfights and deaths. Supposedly Ecuador has the bulk of its military posted on the border. There are already reports in the paper that the Ecuadorian army has destroyed coca processing plants and discovered rebel bases. Some have said that the type of base being built is larger than necessary for border reconnaissance and will be a base that can reach up as far as the Caribbean.

Some of the opposition to the base comes from Guayaquil. Not only is there a new airport but the port is being expanded and the fear is that this will compete with the nation's leading port—Guayaquil. Whether this port could become a conduit for transnationals, I don't know.

I just read an article where it points out that the two government telecommunications companies lost their monopoly (one covers the coastal areas—Guayaquil—the other the sierra—Quito). They will now face foreign competition.

I also happened to hear about gold mining here. The government used to subsidize a particular company 3 percent of its yearly take to mine. It has now been reduced to \$8 per hectare. This particular company mines 12 hectares so that comes out to \$96 per year. Incredible.

If you want some idea of wages, I spoke to manual construction workers. They receive US\$26 a week, and they are paid more than others. A middle school mathematics teacher who puts in four hours a day told me she receives US\$40 a month. Her husband died recently and she has four children to care for. A young machinist I spoke to in Peru makes US\$240 a month, which he considered a good wage.

In Ecuador, skilled workers, such as a plumber, are in demand. A foreign company coming into the country, such as Coca Cola, will pay them five times their present salary to lure them away from Ecuadorian companies.

Guides at the Archeology Museum in Lima are no longer paid by the government. They receive only a tip. When I asked an administrator what I should tip after a two and a half hour tour, she told me \$3.

A basic phrase that people use to describe the situation is “muy dura.”

We'll see what happens tomorrow.

SC

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