

Tens of thousands march in Lima

Peruvian workers defy state of emergency

Cesár Uco
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Tens of thousands of workers marched in downtown Lima Tuesday in defiance of the state of emergency declared by the government of President Alejandro Toledo.

The march was organized by the General Confederation of Peruvian Workers (CGTP in Spanish) and led by striking teachers. State workers, health workers, farmers, peasants and construction workers—all of whom are currently engaged in confrontations, strikes, slowdowns and road blockades—joined the march to protest against the government's policies.

“He’s going to fall, the liar is going to fall,” the marchers chanted, referring to Toledo.

Workers gathered in the mid-morning at the Plaza Dos de Mayo—an historic center that has witnessed the most significant political struggles of the working class for more than a century. From there they marched to the Congress, where a delegation from the CGTP and the teachers union, SUTEP, handed in a petition demanding the resignation of the cabinet, an end to the state of emergency and the resolution of the workers' demands.

While the Toledo government had in recent weeks subjected the capital to a virtual military occupation under the state of emergency, there were no troops and virtually no police visible on the streets of Lima, and therefore no confrontations in the course of the protest march.

Students across the country staged actions on the campuses to protest against army repression that over the past week left one student dead and dozens injured. The Peruvian Students Federation announced a youth march for July 4.

There were also marches and regional strikes in the cities of Puno, Arequipa and Trujillo, all of which have

seen violent confrontations between workers and the armed forces in recent days. In Iquitos, located on the shore of the Amazon River, workers staged a large march led by construction workers carrying heavy tools in preparation for a possible confrontation with the army.

The decision by the Toledo government to declare a 30-day state of emergency was preceded by an explosive development of social struggles throughout the country.

Some 300,000 teachers went on strike May 12 demanding better working conditions and a salary hike of \$60 a month. The ministry of education said that it could offer only half that amount. Teachers have been conducting daily marches in Lima and every other major city in Peru. The strike has paralyzed over 52,000 educational centers in the country.

The teachers are supported by parents groups, which in Lima and the city port of Callao include some 800 organizations. The teachers union leader, Nilver López, declared that the economic system “favors payments on the foreign debt and transnational corporations while the rest of the population lives in poverty.”

Since the last week of May, tens of thousands of poor farmers and peasants have erected barricades with stones, farm equipment and truck tires to block all roads leading to Lima and other large cities. Farmers and peasants are protesting Toledo’s plan to privatize the irrigation system, which is vital to their survival. Due to the roadblocks, food supplies to the capital dropped by 50 percent. This led in some cases to large price increases. It was estimated that Lima could run out of food supplies in less than a week if the blockades continued.

State hospital workers were also on strike, but decided to call the strike off after the government

declared the state of emergency and suspended all constitutional guarantees.

Over 1,400 court workers are on indefinite strike, demanding a new contract and bonuses for overtime. As a result, all legal proceedings, both civil and criminal, are on hold, creating chaos and frustration within an already clogged judicial bureaucracy, and slowing down economic activity. There were bloody confrontations when police tried to remove strikers from the entrance to the Palace of Justice.

There are rumors that Peru's poorly paid police are themselves planning a strike for June 11 and 12.

It was estimated that at one point the number of people in struggle against the government had neared the 2 million mark.

This series of actions amounts to a popular repudiation of the Toledo administration. Toledo came to power two years ago, portraying himself as a crusader against the corruption of his predecessor, President Alberto Fujimori, and the police-state methods of Fujimori's political adviser, Vladimiro Montesinos. Toledo's main rival in the elections was former president Alan García of the populist APRA party.

Toledo pledged to create jobs and increase wages. He promised essentially the same economic program carried out by Fujimori during the 1990s, but without the corruption. Indeed, during the election campaign, Toledo portrayed himself as Washington's candidate against García. The latter earned the enmity of Washington in the 1980s when he cancelled payments on Peru's foreign debt during his crisis-ridden administration.

Loyal to the dictates of the IMF and the wishes of foreign capital, Toledo continued a policy of privatizations, transferring assets from the state to the private sector and guaranteeing favorable conditions for foreign investment. He lowered import taxes and guaranteed free access to the Peruvian market.

Today, Toledo's approval rating has sunk to an all-time low of less than 16 percent. His demagogic promises of jobs and wage increases never materialized.

Unable to resolve the economic crisis, the government also failed to reach an agreement with the other bourgeois parties, especially APRA, whose leader, García, is waiting in the wings to run for the

presidency in 2006. The economic decline combined with a political stalemate have created an institutional crisis, with calls for the government's resignation.

Toledo's declaration of a state of emergency, which suppresses basic rights such as the freedom to meet and protest, is a desperate attempt to control the disintegration of his administration. Most bourgeois parties, as well as the country's business organizations, back the crackdown. They are demanding that if the government cannot come to an agreement with the protesters, it "take drastic measures to guarantee the rule of law and end the uncertainty affecting the economy."



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