

Thousands march in Peru against US-backed mining project

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On Friday, February 10, thousands of Peruvians participated in the “Gran Marcha Nacional por el Agua,” or “Great National March for Water,” in downtown Lima. The event was a major protest against “Conga,” a huge gold and copper mining project put together by US mining giant Newmont and Buenaventura, the Peruvian-based mining company.

The two companies have put together the project, a \$5 billion expansion of the notorious Yanacocha gold mine in the northern Peruvian region of Cajamarca, which, if it goes ahead, would be the biggest single mining investment ever in Peru.

Yanacocha is one of the biggest gold mines in the world, and its profits are critical for the country’s revenues—Peru is the world’s fourth largest exporter of minerals.

Since its presentation to the public, the Conga project has provoked a substantial degree of concern from both the local population and environmental organizations who fear the destruction and pollution of natural water resources, including rivers and lakes upon which thousands of peasants and locals depend.

The implementation of the Conga project requires making use of the headwaters of five rivers (Jadibamba, Chugurmayo, Chirimayo, Chaillhuagón and Pachachaca) and, above all, five lagoons (Perol, Azul, Chica, Mala and Empedrada), which will have to be totally drained so they can be used as dumps for contaminated waste. Yanacocha itself was a lagoon 20 years ago, before it was emptied and used for mining operations.

The march was organized as an inter-provincial journey from all the areas that would suffer the consequences of the project. Over the course of eight days, caravans of buses brought peasants, workers and members of political groups opposing Yanacocha from

the province of Cajamarca (which is where Conga would be implemented), making stops in major cities for rallies and bringing along more participants.

Leading the march were the region’s political leaders: Gregorio Santos, regional president of Cajamarca; Wilfredo Saavedra, leader of the Defense Front of Cajamarca; and Marco Arana, leader of the political party Land and Liberty. Last November, they took part in a political stand-off with the central government of President Ollanta Humala after they refused to negotiate a deal giving a green light to the project. The failure of the deal forced Humala (just five months from his inauguration) to replace key members of his cabinet with hard-liners (see “Peruvian crisis shifts Humala government to the right” [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/dec2011/peru-d15.shtml>]).

Despite the evident shift to the right by Humala and the militarization of his government (he replaced the former civilian prime minister with a right-wing ex-army man), the organizers of the march deliberately set out to increase illusions that Humala can be “convinced” to “fulfill his promises” and go back to the populist and nationalist demagoguery and pro-regional positions that resulted in his substantial victory in Peru’s rural regions in last year’s elections.

This orientation was made abundantly clear when the organizers joined hands with congressmen from Gana Peru—the coalition of “left” parties allied with Humala’s own Nationalist Party—which decided to distance itself from Humala during last November’s crisis and declared its “opposition” to his pro-big-business stance. Cajamarca’s regional leaders’ aim was to convince workers and youth who feel betrayed by Humala that by supporting this “left” part of his government, he can be “pressured” toward a more progressive path.

However, the day of the march, the predominant feeling among the protesters was that Humala is a traitor who had deceived them with false promises.

From the early morning of February 10, crowds began to come to the Plaza 2 de Mayo in downtown Lima. By 2 p.m., the attendance was massive. As with other large-scale demonstrations in Lima, the march attracted myriads of social and political groups that claim to represent workers, students and peasants from all the country's corners along with assorted NGOs and left-wing political parties.

Throughout the afternoon, a sea of people carrying banners and placards began to march down avenues Nicolas de Pierola, Garcilazo de la Vega, Bolivia, Paseo de la Republica, Grau and Colmena chanting slogans opposing the Conga mining project and denouncing Humala as a traitor.

Wherever the march went, walls along the streets were sprayed with slogans such as "Conga doesn't go" and "Humala traitor." Police presence was heavy, although no violent incidents occurred.

The organizers' original plan was to march to Congress carrying a manifesto asking for an end to the Conga project, recognition of the "human right to water" and the "prohibition of mining activities at the headwaters of river basins," among other things.

This was another indication that the organizers are trying to feed illusions in a "peaceful," parliamentary solution to the conflict. Nevertheless, this plan was thwarted when a line of policemen blocked the entrance to Abancay Avenue leading to the Congress building. Marchers then turned to the San Martin Square, where a rally was held in front of a large stage, complete with banners and huge speakers.

There, the organizers, Cajamarca's regional leaders and the "left" congressmen from Gana Peru, repeated the same slogans: "Humala, fulfill your promises," "Down with mining interests"; and, as is common with this type of protest, the organizers claimed that the root of all evil, including Conga, lies with "neo-liberal" economic policies.

No one said, of course, that the source of the problem is capitalism, which Humala is defending with the same methods as his predecessors, promoting the interests of the mining conglomerates at the expense of the masses of poor and working people.

The organizers, Arana, Saavedra and Santos, declared

that if Congress doesn't adopt the march's proposals, a nationwide day-long strike was under consideration. Such a protest action won't affect the government's policy, and—just as with the march—would be utilized by its organizers to steer workers and young people toward a political dead end.



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