

Humala government outlaws strikes by Peruvian teachers and doctors

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A pair of wildcat strikes by teachers and doctors has become the latest episode of class struggle to undermine the government of Peru's nationalist president, Ollanta Humala.

An estimated 14,000 to 15,000 doctors from hospitals throughout the country have joined a strike for a salary increase and to demand more government spending on health care and hospital facilities. In interviews, some doctors have revealed that they earn as little as 800 soles (about \$300) a month. Complaints about inadequate spending in the sector include reports that in some hospitals doctors have been forced to use hardware tools to perform operations, and medicines are stored in non-functioning refrigerators.

During a rally in the capital of Lima, the president of the Medical Federation of Peru (FMP), César Palomino, declared the strike to be “overwhelming” and “observed by doctors in all regions.” He also made clear that he was “ready and willing” to negotiate with the government to reach a “fair solution” to the strike.

Simultaneously, a strike was launched by the main teachers union, SUTEP (United Union of Education Workers), on September 10. The strikers are demanding an immediate rise in salaries and benefits and are rejecting a new “education reform bill” that is rumored to eliminate the right to belong to a union. As with the doctors, the strike has been carried out in most of the regions of the country by thousands of teachers, with many traveling to Lima to engage in major rallies.

In the midst of all this, the union bureaucrats are trying once again to shield Humala, who came to office with their support in July of last year, from the anger of the strikers. Mario Huaman, leader of the CGTP (Peru's main union federation) and a former Stalinist, told the Peruvian daily *La Primera* that the teachers' and doctors' strikes are “not directed against President

Humala,” but rather against Luis Castilla, his minister of economy, a former World Bank employee and “orthodox” free-marketeer who is seen as the main guarantor in the Peruvian government of the continuation of free-market policies imposed by Washington almost 20 years ago.

Huaman is not alone in this political farce. Palomino has also declared to the press that the doctors' strike is “not aimed at the minister of health,” but rather against Castilla, the minister of economy, for “abandoning the public sector,” i.e., health care.

It is not the first time that the unions and the pseudo-left have used this trick. During the uprisings earlier this year against the Conga mining project in the northern region of Cajamarca, the blame for the brutal repression and refusal to engage in dialogue lay, according to the pseudo-left, not with the president himself, but rather with his prime minister, the right-wing former army officer Óscar Valdés. He resigned in July, and was replaced by Juan Jiménez, former minister of justice.

With Jiménez striving to appear more inclined to “dialogue” and less ruthless, a vacuum was left for the pseudo-left and the unions to fill by finding another “bad guy” in the government so they can still shield and promote illusions in Humala himself. Hence the denunciations by Huaman and Palomino of Minister of Economy Castilla.

Nonetheless, among rank-and-file strikers, illusions in Humala appear to be growing thin. Johnson Salvador, a 46-year-old teacher from the rural province of Tarma who joined thousands of teachers in a protest in the capital on September 19, told Reuters that he had voted for Humala because he promised to defend workers and the poor.

“But he's turned out to be just another puppet,”

Salvador said. “If he really wanted to improve education he would raise the education budget and worry about people in this country that have been forgotten.”

The Humala government is making clear that the same methods of violent repression he unleashed against the workers and youth participating in the mining protests in Cajamarca, Espinar and elsewhere this year await the doctors and teachers. The clearest indication is the outlawing of the strikes over two similar but insignificant episodes.

On Tuesday September 18, hundreds of teachers marched towards the Ministry of Education in Lima’s upper class district of San Borja. When they got there, skirmishes began between the teachers and policemen on horseback. Teachers tried to break into the ministry, and some of them threw rocks that broke 17 windows. Two people were hurt. Immediately, the government seized on the event to indict the strike as “unacceptable and violent” and outlaw it. Another march, this one in downtown Lima, managed to reach the main square of the capital, in front of the Palace of Government—where the president resides—but it was quickly broken up by police using water cannon.

Then on Thursday September 20, a group of striking doctors broke into the Arzobispo Loayza Hospital in Lima to convince doctors that were not on strike to join the struggle. Immediately, the minister of health declared the action to be a “violent incursion against assets and people,” and the government outlawed the strike, threatening that the doctors who failed to return to work would face “administrative sanctions” and loss of pay. A similar threat was also issued against the teachers.

It is unclear yet whether those who attacked the ministry of education were striking teachers or agents infiltrated by the government, as SUTEP has suggested. What is clear is that the government has seized on the event not only to declare the strike “illegal,” but also to slander the teachers as “terrorists,” spreading unfounded rumors that behind the attack was a faction inside SUTEP that is linked to the MOVADERF political party.

MOVADERF (Movement for an Amnesty and Fundamental Rights) is politically the direct descendant of the remains of the political bureau of the Maoist Sendero Luminoso, a guerrilla movement that

succeeded in the 1980s in carrying out countless terrorists acts—car bombings, massacres, kidnappings, assassinations—throughout the country. The government unleashed brutal repression in the conflict, which claimed more lives than any other period of war in the country’s history. Sendero Luminoso embraced the reactionary Maoist theory of “people’s war,” which rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and advocated a peasant revolt in the countryside to lay siege to the cities.

Today MOVADERF’s main political proposal is the granting of a general amnesty, not only for the jailed leaders of Sendero Luminoso, but also for members of the security forces who committed atrocities during the so-called “dirty war.”

Despite MOVADERF’s relatively small base, the government has wasted no time in enacting a new law that forbids any group “with links to terrorist movements” or that acts as an “apologist for terrorism” to be formally recognized as a political party. While the law is aimed at MOVADERF, which had gathered some 350,000 signatures—twice as many as required to be placed on the ballot—the law can be applied to any new party that emerges that the government brands as “unsuitable for democracy.”

This is clearly a response to new movements and parties that are emerging from struggles in the regions and provinces, such as Tierra y Libertad, a reformist party with an environmentalist outlook headed by the Catholic priest Marco Arana, who is one of the leaders of the struggle against the Conga mining project in Cajamarca. More fundamentally, it is intended as a measure to use against the emergence of a new revolutionary movement in the Peruvian working class.



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