

Peruvian government crushes riots in Lima market

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Four dead and more than 100 wounded and many more detained was the outcome of the repression of a riot in La Parada—an old wholesale market in the working class district of La Victoria in downtown Lima—by the government of Peruvian President Ollanta Humala and the city administration of the supposedly “left-wing” mayor, Susana Villarán.

For decades, La Parada has been the capital’s main wholesale market. Notorious for its lack of safety measures, health regulations and security and located in an old and poor district, the Villarán mayoralty had decided to shut it down for good. A new market had been built in the eastern district of Santa Anita, and more than 200 vendors had already moved there. However, many hundreds of others refused to go, insisting that the rents at the new market were too high and their customers would not travel so far.

Faced with this resistance, Villarán turned to the police and asked for them to mount a repressive operation.

On October 25 heavy machinery was brought in to place concrete walls in front of the gates of the market, provoking the outbreak of rioting. Around 11 a.m. local TV stations began to report a “pitched battle” between La Parada workers and 500 police. The protesters—most of them young and male—armed themselves with stones and sticks and showed no fear of the police, who responded with tear gas and attacks on horseback. Two people were shot dead by the police; almost a hundred more were wounded.

The level of violence and the tenacity shown by the workers shocked Lima’s ruling elite and the city’s most affluent sections, who were accustomed to seeing this kind of violence only when the so-called “social conflicts” erupted in mining areas far from the capital. As the daily *El Comercio* reported: “It’s disturbing to

watch this kind of protest just a few blocks from the government’s headquarters.”

Virtually all political parties—from the nominal “left” to the extreme right—denounced the protests and praised the police action, showing no sympathy for the dead and wounded who, they claimed, were nothing more than “thieves,” “thugs” and “offenders” that had been “hired” by the vendors to stop the shutdown of the market.

The media played a particularly dirty and vengeful role. They lined up behind the politicians’ slander campaign, repeating without any substantiation that all protesters were “criminals” and publishing close-up photos of their faces so that they could be identified by the authorities. Interior Minister Wilfredo Pedraza even announced the creation of telephone lines which citizens could call to inform the police of the protesters’ whereabouts.

While it is true that street gangs that engage in petty theft and drug dealing hung around La Parada, the campaign by the politicians and the media was designed to obscure a more explosive fact: it was a working class protest for the defense of jobs and livelihoods waged by some of the most impoverished sections of the capital’s population.

Moving reports have emerged about the desperation of vendors and workers who would lose their livelihoods if they were evicted from La Parada. They also complained that despite lowering the prices of the products they sell—mostly meat and vegetables—fewer customers come to the market. José Gallo, lawyer of the market’s traders, said he would sue the state for “misfeasance” for the forced eviction. Retailers have threatened to go on strike.

Even those who could afford to pay the rents in the new market have charged that the authorities duped

them and when they arrived with their products there wasn't actually any space for them in the new market. More than 3,000 manual workers, carters and stevedores, showed up at the gates of the new market protesting that the mayor had promised them they would retain their jobs.

The day of the riot's eruption coincided with the JNE (National Elections Jury) announcement that its board had approved a recall campaign against Mayor Villarán.

The political figure behind the recall campaign is Marco Tulio, an ally of former Lima mayor and presidential candidate Luis Castañeda, and a member of his right-wing political party, Solidaridad Nacional.

Though the concept of recall applies when a local authority has committed "a serious case of corruption" (which Villarán hasn't) Tulio has stated that his campaign is aimed at throwing her out of office over her "incompetent and ineffective" administration. The campaign has cost Tulio one million soles, the source of which he has refused to divulge. Other right-wing figures support the recall because they cannot tolerate seeing a "left-wing socialist" in what is considered the most important post in the country after the presidency.

Tellingly, the recall campaign was launched shortly after Villarán's administration announced that it was going to investigate a corruption scandal involving the administration of Castañeda, Tulio's ally. Reports have surfaced of dubious and fraudulent procedures in the signature collection for the recall, and for many Lima inhabitants it is clear that it is Castañeda himself who is pulling the strings.

As for Villarán, despite the evidence of corruption and fraud in the campaign, at no point has the "reformist mayor" sought to mount a fight against Tulio and Castañeda and expose their true motives. Her only attempt at a defense was to appeal to the JNE to inspect the collected signatures.

Elected in 2010 as an expression of the people's disgust and rejection of traditional politicians, Villarán has moved steadily to the right, and her administration has maintained big business' grip over the city. Her evolution, however, is not merely a matter of her personal politics, but reflects an entire generation of "left" politicians who have made peace with bourgeois rule.

After being criticized for insufficient repression in the

first riot, the mayor decided to prove that she could be relied upon for restoring "order." On Saturday, October 27, 5,000 policemen (in uniforms and plainclothes) marched to La Parada's gates to install additional concrete blocks. This time they were armed with guns and live ammunition and protected by police trucks. The outcome was another two dead and more than 100 injured.

The politicians and media once again praised the police action. Villarán declared that once the market was completely emptied, its space would be used for a massive new police station. The Interior Ministry declared that the "lessons had been learned," and that the police were going to "initiate a training program with staff from other countries."

The following day, police arrested 102 people who allegedly had been connected in some way or other to the protests. Many of them were dragged from their houses, in front of their families and were immediately sent to prison, where they would await trial. According to the authorities, their sentences were going to be "drastic."

Nothing can more graphically illustrate the incapacity of Peru's ruling class to resolve society's more urgent problems than the repression at La Parada. It responds with military-police measures to conflicts that arise from socio-economic problems whose roots lie at the heart of capitalism itself: poverty, the lack of jobs and the inability to use society's vast resources to meet human needs (including that of rational urban development). These are problems that will never be resolved by electing this or that "new face," but *only* through the building of a revolutionary and internationalist party of the working class fighting for socialism.



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