

Public health care workers clash with riot police in Peru

César Uco
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Peruvian public health doctors blocked Javier Prado Avenue, Lima's main artery linking the east and west sides of the city last Friday, clashing with riot police as part of a 48-hour nationwide strike called the day before. The demonstration was organized outside the Westin Hotel, where the minister of health, Nidora de Habich, was participating in an international event.

The strike, called by the Medical Federation of Peru, was over the Ministry of Health's failure to pay bonuses agreed to at the end of a previous walkout.

Medical Federation of Peru president Jesús Bonilla reported that the strike had the support of 24 regional federations and the 45 medical corps of Lima as well as the backing of the Federation of Nurses and the Union of Pharmaceutical and Chemical Workers. If the doctors' demands are not met, he warned, an indefinite nationwide walkout will be called.

In the northern seaport of Chimbote, both of the city's hospitals remained closed after the second day of the strike.

In Chiclayo, on the northern coast, medical personnel organized a one-hour stoppage. It was reported that the action was warmly backed by patients who complained that they were frequently unable to obtain needed care because of the lack of medicine or medical equipment.

In the Santa Gema de Yurimaguas Hospital, located in the Amazon basin, medical personnel went on strike but guaranteed care for emergency cases only.

For the last two years, Peruvian workers in the public sector have been conducting ongoing nationwide marches and strikes against the government of President Ollanta Humala. Elected in 2011 on the basis of promises to narrow Peru's drastic social inequality, as soon as Humala took office he accommodated his policies to the demands of foreign investors for higher profit margins and a reduction in government spending.

Peru has among the lowest wages in Latin America. The current monthly minimum wage is just 750 soles, or US\$268.

César Palomino, the dean of the Medical School of Peru, complained that President Humala recently doubled the salary of his ministers to 30,000 soles a month (over US\$10,000). "It's not fair for a doctor to make 60 soles (US\$22) per shift [at least 8 hours]," he said. Palomino said that doctors working for the Ministry of Health earn US\$1,000 a month, making them among the lowest paid in Latin America. They are demanding a raise to the equivalent of between US\$2,500 and US\$3,500, according to experience.

Other sectors that are on strike or threatening to strike against poverty wages and harsh working conditions are teachers, court employees and the National Police.

Since the union leadership committed itself to collaborate with the government's proposed reform of the health care sector, the health care workers' struggle has run into a brick wall. The purpose of the "reform" is to privatize hospitals and maximize workers' exploitation. During strikes over the last two years, the Peruvian Ministry of Health has been contracting scabs from employment agencies.

The National Federation of Social Security Health Workers put out a leaflet entitled "The reform of Health Care is Privatization," calling the government's program "an extension of the neoliberal model imposed in the 1990s that has failed so badly in different countries."

Last week, Humala was on an official state visit to Israel, promoting investment in Peru. He knows his success in drawing in multinational capital depends on controlling and suppressing social unrest. In the past, he outlawed strikes by doctors and teachers.

Driven by mining exports to China, according to the

World Bank, Peru's GDP grew at an astonishing 53 percent over seven years between 2007 and 2013.

In a recent report, the World Bank stated: "Peru is one of the best performing economies in Latin America, and the new Country Partnership Strategy between Peru and the World Bank focuses on supporting national priorities and improving equity through social services, infrastructure and competitiveness."

In other words, there are ample resources to meet the demands of the health workers, as well as all other public sector employees. But the seal of economic approval is not intended for this purpose, but rather to support Humala's agenda of satisfying foreign investors, whose only concern is to loot Peru's natural resources and exploit its ill-paid labor force.



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