

Mass layoffs follow election of new right-wing mayor in Lima, Peru

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Nearly 3,000 municipal workers have been summarily fired following the taking of office by Lima, Peru's new mayor, Luis Castañeda. The sudden layoffs have caused mass outrage and provoked speculation that a vast reorganization of the municipality may be under way as the new administration claims—thereby justifying its action—that the outgoing administration of the pseudo-left mayor Susana Villarán had left Lima “bankrupt.”

Castañeda, who held office as mayor of Lima for two terms between 2003 and 2010, is a right-wing populist. He was elected last October with 50 percent of the votes, which were split among 13 candidates. He ran on a platform that emphasized the assorted populist public works projects that his past administrations carried out in Lima's poorest districts. He had also been accused of taken part as mayor in a multimillion-dollar embezzlement operation, in which all of his delegates were charged, while he has, so far, escaped prosecution.

Street watchmen (known as *serenazgos*), traffic inspectors and other public employees who staffed various municipal programs learned on January 1 that they had been fired by the incoming administration without any notice. They protested that their contract with the Villarán administration ran until January 31—presumably so that the new administration could have a month to evaluate workers' status and hire new employees, as all new administrations are entitled to do. Instead, Deputy Mayor Patricia Juárez and other members of Solidaridad Nacional (Castañeda's party) insisted that Villarán hired more workers than the budget could sustain.

This explanation has been challenged not only by the workers and their unions, but even by right-wing figures. The explanations for the abrupt layoffs indicate that Castañeda plans to hire new, cheaper labor for the

municipality; cut costs to make more money available for the rapid implementation of his populist public works projects (a major campaign promise); or advance the notion that the municipality is bankrupt so it can get “emergency” status with which it can enact immediate decrees without supervision.

Protests and sit-ins erupted the same day that the workers found out they had been fired. A spokeswoman representing fired *serenazgos*—the majority of them female—declared: “We are more than 300 women hit by this massive, high-handed firing. The current administration simply decided to dispense with our services and shut its doors. There wasn't any notification about it.” A delegation of *serenazgo* women declared as well that the Ministry of Labor refused to help them, arguing that it was beyond its jurisdiction. In all, 700 *serenazgos* have been fired, even though it was reported that Castañeda promised to increase their numbers to 2,500.

Elmer Mercado, representing fired traffic inspectors, condemned the firing of nearly 700 in that category: “They say [our jobs] are affecting the municipality's budget, but that is false, because our jobs are a product of an investment project by the Ministry of Economy.” He also declared that the municipality is already hiring traffic inspectors with lower wages.

Most of the traffic inspectors work under the CAS labor system, a reactionary counter-reform that deprives most public servants of their benefits and rights that were eliminated with the introduction of free-market reforms during the 1990s.

Traffic chaos unfolded on Lima's long Arequipa Avenue—one of the main corridors linking the central and northern districts of the city—due to the absence of inspectors. In an attempt to reduce the number of buses competing for passengers at every corner of Arequipa

Avenue, Villarán had prohibited all private companies and allowed only large municipal buses to operate on the thoroughfare. Traffic inspectors are needed to guide and inform both passengers and drivers.

A passenger commented that “things are worse with Casteñeda; that he will hire workers at will, passing over the established rules for hiring municipal workers. Castañeda will rule as a dictator.”

An elderly woman said that the bus was so crowded that she feared being robbed, since the crush leaves many passengers unable to reach the poles and moving backward and forward supporting themselves against other passengers—a perfect scenario for pickpockets. “In this bus I can easily break a bone,” added the woman.

Trying to save face, the municipality tweeted a picture of a meeting between members of the municipal workers’ union and the new administration’s top officials, claiming the union declared its support for the new mayor. Later, the union itself denied this claim, saying that the meeting was simply an informative session between the two parties. The union said it will take the municipality to court over the firings.

Responsibility for the return of Castañeda lies with the Peruvian pseudo-left, whose support for the four-year term of Villarán’s pro-business administration left a vacuum that could be filled by a right-wing candidate demagogically promising immediate public works. So wide is the chasm between the population and official politics that during the campaign a poll discovered that more than half of the city’s population would vote for a candidate that “steals but does public works.” Another poll found that 80 percent of the population doesn’t feel attached to any political party whatsoever.

Whatever illusions existed in Castañeda among the city’s poorest before the election, there is now a growing sense of outrage among Lima’s population that a patently corrupt figure is carrying out arbitrary firings of municipal workers. These mass layoffs make clear that a new period of class conflict is emerging in the Peruvian capital.



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