

Peruvian government repeals law targeting young workers

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Almost two weeks after thousands of young workers and students marched to protest Peru's new "Youth Labor Law," President Ollanta Humala summoned an extraordinary session of the country's Congress in order to debate the viability of the legislation.

The law was repealed in a landslide vote January 26—in time to preempt another demonstration called for Thursday—with many of the original congressmen who voted for it changing their positions, obviously because of the unexpected mass opposition.

Passed into law late last year, the legislation was cynically promoted as a means to encourage the hiring of young workers by small enterprises, through the slashing of benefits to reduce labor costs for the employer. In reality, it was part of a series of economic packages passed last year to make the working class pay for the deceleration of the Peruvian economy.

A recent investigation by the Peruvian daily *La República* shed some light on the intervention of the employers' associations in the drafting of the bill. In October 2014, the Exporters Association (Asociación de Exportadores, ADEX) presented a presentation to the government Labor Commission entitled: "The Reforms that Peru Needs."

"In the presentation," the report states, "ADEX proposes the reform of the general labor regime (...) reducing vacations, gratuities, compensations and the facilitation of firings."

The successive marches against the bill were met with a rising crescendo of state violence, along with a campaign of intimidation by the government and alleged infiltration by agents provocateurs. Minister of the Interior Daniel Urresti proposed asking for IDs for anyone participating in one of the early marches.

Weeks later, some 20 activists received a "preventive complaint" by an attorney warning them beforehand

against engaging in the promotion of the protests. And during the preparations for the fourth march, gun-toting policemen detained young activists from the district of San Juan de Lurigancho for handing out leaflets promoting the march.

The marches have been organized and led by radical youth collectives with no significant association to established "left" parties. There has also been a qualitative increase in the self-organization of young activists who, through the use of social media, divided the city into 12 "zones" in order to organize the protest's agenda and route. The "zones" have also become forums for discussion and activism in the district neighborhoods, without the active initiative of either the unions or the pseudo-left. This practice has also spread outside the capital.

Sensing the ruling elite's concern that this movement could not be contained, the unions and pseudo-left parties decided to lead the last march on January 15. However, the young demonstrators accused the General Confederation of Unions of Peru (Confederación General de Trabajadores del Peru, CGTP) of betraying the main goal of the march: to demonstrate pacifically in front of the Congress.

"The CGTP agreed to ensure the defense of 10,000 workers as they led the protest along Abancay Avenue (which leads to Congress)," wrote activist César Cornejo. But at the moment of reaching the avenue, he charged, "the few unions then wrapped their flags and left. A small police provocation was staged by the CTP and Renovar (the union and collective of the right-wing APRA party, respectively) and the repression was unleashed on students who were occupying most of the street."

The protesters were dispersed through downtown Lima, pursued by policemen firing tear gas and beating

young workers who fought back.

“We couldn’t go to Congress because the unions who were supposed to ensure our safety abandoned us,” stated Cornejo.

With polls showing nearly 70 percent of the population rejecting the youth labor bill, media spokesmen from the Peruvian right called for the law’s repeal. They fear that the unexpected youth radicalization may jeopardize the prospects for the election of a right-wing, pro-business candidate in next year’s presidential elections. Expected to run are APRA’s Alan Garcia, the fujimorista Keiko Fujimori and the multi-millionaire American-Peruvian banker Pedro Pablo Kuczynski. All these big-business-supported politicians have feigned, in varying degrees, opposition to the law.

The repealing of the law is a defeat for Humala, who already suffered from an approval rating of just 25 percent. Not only did seven of his Gana Peru party’s congressmen fail to obey the party line, voting to repeal the legislation, the resignation of one congressman from its ranks has left Gana Peru with just 34 of the 130 seats in Congress, one less than the right-wing fujimorista opposition party, Fuerza Popular.

As his government enters its last year in power, the Peruvian bourgeois media is speculating over whether the population’s loss of confidence in Humala—elected in a distorted expression of popular rejection of the “neoliberal” policies of his predecessors—will evolve into a further radicalization of the working class and youth, or whether popular discontent can be channeled behind a pro-business candidate, as they clearly hope.



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