

Peru's mining protests suspended amid evidence of leadership's corruption

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Mass protests in Peru against the proposed Tia Maria mining project have been suspended following a statement by the Southern Copper Corporation that it was postponing the giant copper mine project for two months.

What had developed into an escalating mass movement expressed in a series of powerful strikes and roadblocks has been sidelined, at least in part, by revelations that the most prominent leader of the protests had apparently demanded money in return for calling off the struggle.

This became apparent with the release of an audiotape in which a man identified as Tambo Valley Defense Front director Jose "Pepe Julio" Gutierrez is heard soliciting a \$1.5 million bribe to be split three ways between himself, Deán Valdivia's Mayor Jaime de la Cruz and Tambo valley farmers' board president Jesus Cornejo.

Gutierrez has been jailed on suspicion of extortion based upon the tape, which was provided by a Peruvian lawyer for Southern Copper. While those he named on the tape have denied any involvement and distanced themselves from him, Gutierrez has charged that he is the victim of a frameup.

The Tia Maria copper mining project is located near the peasant community of Islay in the province of Cocachacra, department of Arequipa. Southern is the largest copper producer in Peru and Mexico. It is mainly owned by the Mexican Group (Grupo Mexicano). Mexico has US\$14 billion invested in Peru. Tia Maria is scheduled to reach production of 120,000 tons of copper cathodes, requiring an investment of US\$1.6 billion.

As early as 2003, peasants of the Tambo valley that crosses the province have complained that such a mining project would end up polluting the waters of the Tambo River together with their farm land.

An indefinite strike was called in Islay, which in a short period of time spread to become a successful 48-hour regional strike involving most of Peru's south, including departments of Arequipa, Apurímac, Ayacucho, Cusco,

Moquegua, Puno and Tacna.

The struggle spread to other regions. It included Cajamarca in the north, where the US\$5 billion Conga project is located. That department has been the scene of bitter struggles between the local population and the Buenaventura mine, partially owned by the Canadian-based Newmont Mining Company. Support for Tia Maria strike reached El Cercado, a poor, working class neighborhood located in downtown Lima. There, some 3,000 demonstrators confronted the PNP (Peruvian National Police), who fired shots in the air to disperse the demonstrators.

In the Tambo valley, youth calling themselves "espartambos" confronted militarized National Police pelting them with stones from their slingshots. Thousands congregated in the Plaza Mayor of Arequipa, the largest city in the south, chosen as the center of the action by the protesters.

The powerful indefinite strike by the community of Islay early this year was called off by the leadership after Southern Peru said they will cancel operations in the department of Arequipa, arguing they were facing a new type of "anti-mining terrorism." The representative of the Centre of Export, Transformation, Industry, Trade and Services Matarani (Ceticos Matarani), Fernando Bossio, said that if the state bows to the demands of the anti-mining protests, investment in the area will disappear. As the confrontations with the peasants continued, the government declared a state of emergency in Islay.

Initially, President Ollanta Humala gave the go-ahead to Southern Copper based on an Environmental Impact Study dated 2003. The local population and authorities objected because the study proposed using the waters of the Tambo River. Two more studies were made after the indefinite strike ended in violent confrontations, leaving five dead and 50 injured.

These studies, elaborated at the request of Southern by

Geoservice Ingenieria SAC, misrepresented the environmental impact of the desalination plant, which was chosen as an alternative to using the Tambo River waters—as the 2003 project proposed. Experts concluded that it would produce poisonous chlorinated hydrocarbon that would affect the wellbeing of hydrological and marine fauna. Southern has a record of showing blatant disregard for the Peruvian environment since the 1950s.

In January 2015, the Public Prosecutor's Environmental Office requested that the president of Southern Copper Corporation Óscar González Rocha be hit with a two-and-a-half year custodial sentence and a fine \$1 million for what it charged was environmental contamination in the sea off the port of Ilo. Mining watchdog Osinergmin fined the company 608,000 Peruvian nuevos soles for having violated environmental standards, and the Organization for Environmental Evaluation and Oversight (OEFA) fined Southern Copper 14 times for a total of US \$530,745.

Environmental abuse, violations of regulations and disregard for miner safety is not unique to Southern, but applies generally to all foreign and national mines in Peru and the rest of South America.

The corruption revealed in the leadership of the mass protests against Tia Maria is part of a generalized trend that extends from the presidential palace downward. President Ollanta Humala ran as a “left” populist candidate in 2011, promising a program of “social inclusion” based on the redistribution of the wealth extracted from Peru by the transnational mining interests. Since taking office, he has been the principal advocate of these mining firms, subordinating everything, including Peru’s environment, to their profits.

The president’s wife, Nadine Heredia, has become mired in a corruption scandal, involving her business association with a manager of Humala’s presidential campaign, Martin Belaunde Lossio, who is accused of influence peddling and money laundering. Local newspapers accuse the Peruvian first lady of failing to declare US \$57,000 in income from the period preceding Humala’s successful run for the presidency.

Labor officials demanding money to sell out workers struggles and local officials accepting payoffs to quell popular protests have become commonplace.

Last year the regional governor of Ancash—another important mining region—Cesar Alvarez, was accused of corruption and being surrounded by hitmen. The Anti-Corruption Prosecutor’s office declared that he and his cohorts employed “assassins to intimidate and/or

eliminate their political adversaries, accusers or witnesses to criminal acts; and had used front men to launder money into the economy.”

The same corruption exists in the mining region of Cajamarca, where the masses stopped the US\$5 billion Conga mining project a few months after Humala took office in 2011. Regional Governor Gregorio Santos, who led the mass mobilizations to shut down Conga, “is to be transferred from the Piedras Gordas de Ancón prison—where he is serving a sentence for corruption of officials—to the Lurigancho prison,” *Peru21* reported recently. Santos is accused of “presumably having ordered the kidnapping and torture of the citizen Petronila Vargas and the murder of her father” in 2005, the news outlet reported.

A few months ago, the leadership of the two main trade union confederations the Stalinist-led CGTP and the Aprista CTP were involved in hiring hitmen to kill their rivals in cities located 200 kilometers north of the capital, Lima.

The news of corruption, kidnappings, paybacks and the use of hitmen by trade union leaders and regional presidents takes place at a time of significant deterioration of the Peruvian economy, growing unemployment and mass mobilizations of university students against a law that would have cut salaries and benefits for the youth. As result of the youth mobilizations, Congress annulled the law.

The political situation in Peru is increasingly dominated mass discontent, which the media tries to minimize in a desperate attempt to continue portraying the country as a paradise for foreign investment.

Though the Tia Maria conflict is at presently suspended, it must be emphasized that the truce was engineered thanks to confusion among the masses after the revelations of corruption within a leadership that was prepared to sell them out.

Humala’s government is totally discredited, and the trade union, populist and pseudo-left elements that betray the mass movement of workers, peasants are rapidly becoming so. What is required in Peru as throughout Latin America is a new revolutionary leadership based upon the program of socialism and internationalism.



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