Privatized highway toll sparks mass protest in Peru

Cesar Uco
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Peruvian police unleashed violent repression last week against protests that broke out in Lima, the country's capital, over a privatized toll road scheme imposed upon the main highway linking impoverished northern working class districts with the city center.

The northern Lima district of Puente Piedra was the center of the clashes over the new toll collection program introduced on the Pan American Highway. Residents of the area have no alternative but to pay the toll to travel even the shortest distance in and out of their neighborhood, with the money going to private corporations that effectively own the road.

The new tolls raise to 10 soles, or US$3.03, the roundtrip fee for traveling one kilometer on the road where, the protesters charge, the construction project has not even been completed. Ten soles correspond to two and a half times the hourly minimum wage. Transportation workers and inhabitants of Puente Piedra had been protesting against the toll hike since last August, but they were ignored by the authorities.

The latest weeklong protests began January 5, when hundreds of demonstrators blocked the highway, destroyed toll booths, burned tires and clashed with riot police. January 12 saw a far bigger demonstration, with some 5,000 protesters taking to the streets carrying signs reading "No to tolls" and "Down with corruption." They confronted an army of 2,000 police backed by armored cars and using multiple volleys of teargas and rubber bullets against the crowd.

Witnesses reported that an unknown individual among the protesters hurled a Molotov cocktail (a bottle filled with gasoline and a lighted cloth) at the police. It was widely believed that the action was carried out by an undercover police provocateur to provide the pretext for the repression. The cops waited until protesters, most of them younger people, came within a few yards of their lines to open fire with tear gas canisters and rubber bullets to maximize the injuries inflicted upon the crowd.

A five-year-old boy was killed during the protests, when he got off his bike to watch the events and was hit by a vehicle.

There were injuries reported on both sides, and more than 60 people were arrested and hauled away on police buses. Among those arrested were three women and six children; the latter were quickly released.

"The Public Ministry on Friday requested three months of preventive detention for 55 people arrested," the daily *Correo* reported. However, Interior Minister Carlos Basombrío, speaking for the government of President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (PPK), spoke out against the toll collection in the area and stressed that not all the detainees were criminals.

Last week's mass protest erupted despite the local government's announcement of a month-long suspension of the new tolls and the claim that an alternative was being sought. The action came following a statement by Walter Gutierrez, Peru's national ombudsman, calling for a renegotiation of the contract ceding the road to multinational corporations.

The contract was originally signed in 2013 between Lima's then mayor, Susana Villaran, who came into office with the backing of the Peruvian pseudo-left, and the scandal-plagued Brazilian construction giant, Odebrecht. In return for construction of new overpasses and maintenance of pedestrian bridges, the road was placed under the operation of a Rutas de Lima, a subsidiary of Odebrecht.

Since then, Odebrecht's CEO has been imprisoned in connection with the massive kickback scandal surrounding the state-run Brazilian energy corporation Petrobras, and the company has agreed to pay $3.5

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billion in a plea deal with the US Justice Department for paying bribes to government officials around the world. This includes an acknowledged $29 million in bribes to Peruvian officials over the course of three separate governments.

Odebrecht subsequently sold a majority interest in Rutas de Lima to Brookfield, the Canadian transnational asset management corporation, with an 18 percent share going to the Peruvian financial firm Sigma.

Lima's current right-wing Mayor Luis Castaneda (of the Solidaridad Nacional party) has insisted that the tolls must be implemented under the terms of the contract negotiated by his predecessor, Villaran.

The involvement of Odebrecht and the two financial investment firms has deepened popular anger and raised concerns within the Peruvian ruling establishment over the protests. It is for this reason that the ombudsman, various TV journalists and even the reactionary head of the Catholic Church have feigned concern over the tolls and the police repression.

President Kuczynski, who had previously served as a minister in two Peruvian governments and then made a fortune as a Wall Street investment banker, has seen his approval ratings plummet since he came to power last July, vowing to lead a technocratic government that would boost Peru's flagging economy. The most recent polls show support for the president at only 43 percent--compared to 63 percent in September--with 45 percent expressing disapproval of his government.

Having served as finance minister and prime minister in the government of former president Alejandro Toledo, Kuczynski is himself implicated in the Odebrecht scandal. In 2006, as prime minister, he signed a law allowing Odebrecht to bid on--and win--contracts to construct two highways, in spite of a ban on the company winning such deals because of problems stemming from a previous project. He is to be called to give testimony in the Justice Ministry's ongoing probe of the Odebrecht bribery scandal.

Popular suspicion of government corruption playing a role in the imposition of the tolls in Puente Piedra has been further fueled by the case of Alex Kouri, former governor of the Callao province, who was jailed last year over a bid-rigging scheme that involved the setting up of toll booths whose proceeds went into his own pocket.

While relative calm returned to the area on Friday, a reporter from *Aqui y Ahora* found police deployed at regular intervals on the highway, with four busloads of cops being held at the ready. Despite the temporary lifting of the tolls, anger is still simmering and another demonstration has been called for January 19. Among the popular grievances is a sharp rise in transportation fares since the tolls were imposed.

The fight against the toll increases in Lima is similar, on a smaller scale, to the "gasolinazo," in which Mexican workers have engaged in nationwide protests against the sharp rise in fuel prices imposed by the government of President Enrique Peña Nieto.

As in Mexico, the Peruvian government's reaction has been a stepping up of repression. Gen. Gaston Rodríguez, the head of the National Police, told the newspaper *Correo*: "Young police officers were recruited [for the protests] because we had information that part of the infiltrators or part of the people that could initiate this situation of aggression would be young people. That is why we have selected within the *Terna* group the younger non-commissioned officers and more physically prepared to counter them."

Terna, the Spanish acronym for "Tactical Urban Operative of the National Police", specializes in collecting information about and violently confronting the legitimate protests of the Peruvian people.

These statements are an indication that the government is preparing the repressive forces to deal with a more widespread uprising of the working class in Peru under the pretext of fighting crime. It is estimated that the number of social conflicts in rural areas, mainly around mining projects involving foreign investment, has risen to more than 200 per month.

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