

Peruvian teachers strike as Kuczynski's government plunges into crisis

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For two months, Peruvian teachers have been on strike, demanding higher pay, the abolition of an education counter-reform and the improvement of the callously neglected state of public education in Peru. Reportedly, more than 200,000 teachers in 18 regions of the country are participating in the strike, making it one of the largest in the last decade.

The evident indifference with which President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski's right-wing government has been dealing with their demands and its obsessive effort to brand the militant teachers as "terrorists" has further damaged its approval rating, already plummeting in the wake of the devastating effects of the so-called "Niño costero" landslides earlier this year.

The education workers' strike follows a nationwide miners' strike against new anti-labor laws in July that was cancelled by the bureaucracy after only two days for a round of negotiations; a nearly month-long public doctors and nurses strike for better wages and the improvement of the nearly bankrupt state of the public healthcare sector and a two-day strike by judicial employees.

The teachers' strike was set off on July 4 after the Kuczynski government failed to fulfill its promise to raise teachers' wages during its first year in office. But the issues in the strike run deeper. As with the Peruvian working class as a whole, teachers have seen a decline in wages and living standards as government after government has adhered to the main premises of austerity, deregulation and destruction of labor rights contained in the so-called Washington Consensus of free-market neoliberal counter-reforms initiated by the authoritarian government of Alberto Fujimori in the 90s.

Teachers confront the continuation of these measures in the so-called Education Reform (Ley de Reforma

Magisterial), a tool of the ruling class that, in the name of "meritocracy," establishes eight salary levels based on the results of nationwide teacher "evaluations," with the highest scores resulting in the highest salaries. Most of Peru's teachers work in impoverished areas where the scores are the lowest, and the "reform" is seen as a way to lay off public teachers who fail the evaluations.

Even right-wing figures have been forced to acknowledge the despairing conditions under which teachers are struggling: currently 40 percent of basic education public teachers in Peru lack labor stability and have no benefits, and the number has risen every year. The average monthly wage ranges from 1,200 to 1,500 Peruvian soles (US\$400 to US\$500), only a tenth of what teachers received in real terms less than five decades ago.

Teachers began walking out on June 15. They have blocked roads and access to airports in the regions of Cusco, Puno, Junin, Ayacucho and Arequipa – including in the Machu Picchu sanctuary—with repeated confrontations with the police.

After a series of negotiations between the striking regions' governors and union representatives, on July 4 the Kuczynski government declared it would raise the teachers' wage to 2,000 Peruvian soles (approximately US\$650).

However, the government declared that wages would be cut for any teacher who failed to return to classes by July 7. This threat failed. Only four regional unions agreed to end the strike—Lima, Cusco, Pasco, Lambayeque—while 16 others voted to continue the walkout. Reportedly, some regional governors have supported the strike for fear of losing local support for their administrations.

Upset by the prolongation of the strike and the determination of the teachers, the government

proceeded to slander the workers, using the well-worn Peruvian tactic of accusing them of being sympathizers of Sendero Luminoso—the Maoist guerrilla movement that employed acts of terrorism in their “popular warfare” against the state in the 80s.

The government’s propaganda campaign was supported—to the surprise of many workers—by leading members of Patria Roja (“Red Fatherland,” PR), the so-called “radical left” party that four decades ago founded SUTEP (Sindicato Unitario de Trabajadores por la Educación en el Perú), the confederation of unions that represents most of Peru’s teachers.

PR, which traces its origins to a 1970s Maoist split from the Stalinist Peruvian Communist Party, has for decades staffed the bureaucracy of SUTEP. Its representatives manage the teacher’s pension fund—“Derrama Magisterial”—as a business, investing its assets and profiting from them.

Rolando Breña, the PR’s general secretary, claimed in an interview that there are “political interests” behind the teachers’ strike mobilization and that its supposed “violent excess” is the result of infiltration of SUTEP by MOVAREF, a political party seen as the descendent of Sendero Luminoso (SL), whose principal aims are amnesty for both SL members and members of the military who committed human rights crimes during the so-called dirty war of the 80s and national “reconciliation.”

Alfredo Velásquez, SUTEP general secretary, emphasized the union bureaucracy’s interest in negotiating with the government and called for the “demarcation” of “groups that incite hate and disorder” and went on to personally brand regional union leaders as MOVAREF members for their insistence on continuing the workers’ mobilization.

These remarks prove how integrated into the political establishment the union bureaucracy has become and demonstrate its abandonment of the most basic demands of the teachers.

Teachers have responded with public denunciations charging that the SUTEP bureaucracy—and Patria Roja—are “traitors” who do not represent them. Kuczynski’s government has been negotiating agreements with political operatives who don’t exercise control over their supposed rank-and-file.

Over the last week, teachers have poured into the

capital of Lima from all the regions to protest against the government, staging sit-ins in San Martín square—a traditional site for left-wing demonstrations in downtown Lima. Attempts to march towards Congress have been met with police repression. Despite this, polls show that a significant number of Peruvians support the teachers’ demands.

Kuczynski’s government, which never had mass support, has been further discredited by the confrontation, with its approval rating sinking to a staggering 29 percent. Other Peruvian administrations have reached that same low (and even worse), but only at the end of their terms. Kuczynski’s government has just finished its first year in office.

In a populist attempt to gather support among teachers, Fuerza Popular (FP), Kuczynski’s right-wing rival that dominates Congress, began talks with teachers in order to assume the role of an intermediary with the government. The FP’s cynical opportunism was on display when an FP congresswoman declared that: “FP identifies itself with the teachers whether or not they’re terrorists.”

The right-wing opposition along with the main pseudo-left opposition fronts, the Frente Amplio and Nuevo Perú, have asked for the Education Minister, Marilú Martens, to resign in an attempt to placate workers and find someone more capable of negotiating an end to their strike.



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