

Peruvian teachers strike in defiance of government ban

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Peruvian teachers have continued an indefinite strike in defiance of a government decree Wednesday declaring their action illegal and threatening mass firings in retaliation.

The decree was imposed in the 19 out of 24 of the country's regions where the action has shut down public schools. According to business daily *Gestión*, 70 percent of public schools remain closed, affecting 3.5 million students.

Prime Minister César Villanueva warned that teachers who fail to heed the strike ban will face administrative measures, including the loss of pay for every day not worked.

Minister of Education Daniel Alfaro was more menacing, telling the daily *Expreso* that “teachers who do not come to work for three consecutive days will be definitively replaced,” having been deemed to have abandoned their jobs. The government will also freeze the accounts of any regional government that pays strikers for days not worked, he said.

The government has attempted to vilify the teachers movement, with the minister of the interior, Carlos Basombrio, linking it to the former Maoist guerrilla movement Sendero Luminoso, based on the fact that a few of the strike's leaders belong to Movadef (Movement for Amnesty and Fundamental Rights), a group that has called for the release of imprisoned Sendero members.

Hundreds of teachers have come into Lima from the provinces to participate in daily demonstrations against the government. They are being fed by soup kitchens and sleeping on cardboard on the floor of the union headquarters.

According to *Gestión*: “The government has practically agreed to all salary demands, although it will be gradual, but refuses to yield on the evaluation of

teachers' performance,” a measure supposedly aimed at removing those found incompetent.

The claim that demands dealing with wages and benefits have been resolved has been rejected by the teachers themselves, who continue to press for both salary increases and an increase in the education budget in daily mass marches.

The conditions facing teachers in a country that lacks proper roads are extremely harsh. A considerable number of teachers have to travel hours on foot every day to get to schools to teach, with a salary of just 1,200 soles (US\$ 370) a month.

Thus far, there have been no violent confrontations between the police and teachers. During the last 50-day walkout by teachers last year, however, demonstrations by teachers were brutally attacked by the police on several occasions.

The present strike is based on the government's failure to fulfill the agreements reached to settle the 2017 teachers strike. The teachers' union president, Pedro Castillo, has declared that teachers are preparing larger mobilizations in the coming days. He said that one of the main demands was an increase in the education budget to 6 percent of GDP; it currently stands at 3.67 percent.

The teachers' strike is part of growing wave of workers' struggles throughout Peru. Railroad workers in Cusco walked out, while in Lima and its neighboring port city of Callao, transit workers launched a strike Wednesday.

It was estimated that half of public transport was paralyzed in Lima at rush hour Wednesday morning. The attitude of the government was to accept the demands of the transport workers, approving 280 new licenses, which extend transport companies' rights to continue operating until 2019.

In spite of the agreement, Lima municipal officials issued a warning asking the police to intervene if there were incidents involving people trying to take the bus to work.

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The highly visible "tourist" train to Machu Picchu was partially paralyzed by the strike of railroad workers. They are demanding wage increases and also an increase in the education budget. They are in the third day of an indefinite strike.

In addition, there are 198 unresolved social conflicts—146 of which are active—that are threatening to erupt once again because of the intransigence of the administration of Peru's new President Martin Vizcarra in denying their basic demands.

The Peruvian ruling class has been taken aback by the mass movement of workers and peasants all over the country, which is disrupting their attempts to destabilize a crisis-ridden state apparatus. Expressing fear and concern, the daily *Expreso* led Wednesday's edition with "Strike season begun in Peru." It warned that a "new strike wave and protests threaten the country," and that many more workers could be expected to "join the indefinite teachers' general strike that started Monday."

The Peruvian economy has been in decline for the past two years. The economic crisis has been combined with a crisis of governability, with former president Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (PPK) forced to resign over his involvement in the multibillion-dollar bribery and concessions scandal involving the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht. Recently, it was revealed that the bribes in Peru could amount to a sum much higher than the previously reported US\$29 million.

The approval ratings of politicians in the executive and legislative branch are below 20 percent. The right-wing fujimorista Fuerza Popular, which dominates the legislature, is divided between the followers of Keiko Fujimori and her younger brother Kenji. In December, Kenji struck a deal with president PPK to free his jailed father, Alberto Fujimori, who had been sentenced to 25 years in prison for crimes against humanity, in exchange for avoiding impeachment. According to the polling firm Ipsos, as of April 2018, Keiko's approval rating was a meager 19 percent, her brother Kenji's, 15 percent. The left bourgeois parties fare no better, with

their most visible leader, Veronika Mendoza from Nuevo Peru, reaching an approval rate of only 18 percent. Meanwhile, the governing party has seen its representation in Congress cut almost in half.

Given the discrediting of all the major parties and institutions in Peru, a renewal of the class struggle threatens to destabilize the entire existing capitalist political setup.



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