

Regional strike against mining project fuels divisions within Peru's crisis-ridden government

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Since August 5, Peru's southern region of Arequipa has been gripped by a region-wide strike and mass protests against the government granting a license to initiate the construction of two open-pit mines in the La Joya desert region. The mining project, which is located in Cocachacra, in Arequipa's Islay province, is commonly known as "Tia Maria."

Unions and community organizations have called for an indefinite strike beginning today, August 22, against the project. On Tuesday, protesters and police clashed once again in the Matarani district, the site of Peru's second largest port through which much of the country's mining and agricultural exports flow.

The company behind the Tia Maria project is Southern Copper (SC). It is a subsidiary of Grupo Mexico, Mexico's biggest mining company, which has been widely criticized for damaging the Mexican environment through the dumping of mining wastes, toxic spills and other activities which are obviously not confined to Mexico. In Peru and elsewhere, when mine tailings are not openly dumped into rivers and the sea, they are pumped into reservoirs behind dams that are precariously built and tend to collapse, as was tragically seen in the 2015 Mariana dam disaster that killed 19 people in Brazil.

The Tia Maria project was first announced in 2003, but it was not until 2009 that SC produced an Environmental Impact Study (EIS). An EIS is a mandatory investigation into the potential environmental impact on an area by an enterprise that exploits it. By law, no mining project can begin development without the Ministry of Mines and Energy (MINEM) approving an EIS presented by a company, assuring that its project will not harm the environment or any human activity related to it.

The local population of farmers and agricultural workers in Cocachacra's Tambo Valley depend upon the local Tambo river for their products which they export to other regions, and even as far as Bolivia. They were concerned about the consequences of the project, such as the dust raised by the giant explosions needed to open the pits and the use of the water from the Tambo river, and its pollution.

In order to give SC's EIS some credibility, the MINEM sent it to be reviewed by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), expecting it to be approved by this body and thus obtaining political cover for providing the construction license to SC.

The UNOPS, however, said exactly the opposite of what the MINEM and SC had wanted. In its review, it found the EIS elaborated by SC raised concern primarily over the use of the Tambo river water, but also about the possible use of dangerous mercury in the operations. The MINEM abruptly ended the contract with the UN, and no other EIS from Peru has been presented to UNOPS since.

UNOPS' inconvenient review deepened the distrust of the Islay people toward the Tia Maria project, but behind their opposition also lay well-known environmental devastation produced by mining in other regions of

Peru. A clear example is the region of Cajamarca where the national Buenaventura Corporation drained entire lagoons in order to turn them into open-pit mines, altering for the worse the lives of thousands of people. After nearly two decades of extractive mining operations, Cajamarca remains one of the poorest provinces in Peru.

The region of Arequipa also has a history of militancy and opposition to diktats coming from the capital, Lima, with a massive uprising there in 1956 leading to the downfall of the US-backed dictator Manuel Odria, who had brutally oppressed and jailed members of the bourgeois nationalist APRA movement.

In April 2011, protests and strikes were called by the Council of Tambo Workers (*Junta de usuarios del Tambo*) and the Tambo Valley Defense Front (*Frente de Defensa del Valle del Tambo*)—two grassroots organizations representing farmers, agricultural workers and small businesses concerned by Tia Maria that have no official links to Peru's political parties or unions. Their main demand was the complete cancellation of the project. The "nationalist" government of President Ollanta Humala sent militarized police to repress the demonstrators, resulting in a toll of three dead. Eventually, the government had no choice but to suspend the project.

In 2013, SC announced a new EIS on which they tackled the water supply problem by announcing the construction of a desalination plant that would use water from the Pacific Ocean instead of the Tambo River for the project. This new EIS was approved by the MINEM and protests once again erupted in 2015 opposing the project and demanding its cancellation. Once again, the MINEM retreated and suspended the project.

Then, in July of this year, with SC's EIS facing expiration in less than a month, the government decided to grant the construction license for the Tia Maria project. Aware that this meant another confrontation with the Tambo inhabitants, SC declared that it would open a "dialogue" with the community before the real construction begins.

Once again Tambo's grassroots organizations called for a region-wide strike on August 5, while sending an appeal to the government. This time they were joined by Arequipa's regional president Elmer Caceres and other local authorities who appealed directly to President Martin Vizcarra to intervene and cancel Tia Maria's construction.

Thousands of people aligned with 30 regional organizations joined the strike on August 5. There were frequent confrontations with the police, and workers continuously blocked the South Pan-American highway and the streets of Arequipa's capital city, affecting commerce and economic activity.

Most importantly, workers blocked the Matarani port, prompting commercial ships to turn back and preventing the export of minerals from the Las Bambas mine, in Apurimac, against which the local population also fought. Militarized police were sent to evict strikers from the port.

Three days later, on August 8, the Mining Council—a MINEM body that receives appeals from the states and resolves them—announced the suspension, not of the project itself, but only of the construction license, for 120 days. In its decision it noted the “existing risk of the loss of human lives besides the already experienced economic losses.”

The Mining Council will take this time to review the appeals presented by Arequipa’s local authorities and decide whether or not to renew the license. Meanwhile the strike continued—mainly in the Tambo Valley region—although its intensity decreased.

Then on August 10, the corporate media ran stories revealing a closed-door conversation held between Vizcarra and Arequipa’s local authorities—including the regional president Caceres—on July 24. An unnamed participant in the conversation had secretly recorded it and leaked it to the press.

In the conversation, Vizcarra tells the local authorities that the government could agree to the license’s suspension in order to maintain the dialogue roundtable, but that he could not immediately announce the cancellation because he needed an “argument” for it. He feigned sympathy for Tia Maria’s opponents.

The corporate media and opposition congressmen reacted furiously to the leaked tapes, charging a “capitulation” to the “anti-mining extremists,” and saying Vizcarra had betrayed not only the “entrepreneur class” but the people by negotiating in secret and sending policemen to suppress the protests when he had already taken a decision beforehand about how to deal with the issue.

While Vizcarra is more cautious about how to deal with the Tia Maria conflict than his presidential predecessors, this in no way means that he has rejected the project. Similarly, the local authorities in Arequipa, who speak for the regional bourgeoisie, are just as concerned as the central government over the economic losses caused by the strike.

Lima’s traditional ruling elite would like to silence the demands of the Tambo Valley people by organizing a bloodbath, as was done in Bagua in 2009 and Cajamarca, Espinar and Tambo itself in 2011 and 2012. No one should harbor any illusion that Vizcarra would not order repression when all the viable avenues for dialogue run out.

The leaked tapes and the protest from the representatives of big business in the press and Congress are clearly an attempt to bring Vizcarra into line, warning him not to concede again—not even *temporarily*, as in this case—to popular demands.

The tapes have also fueled divisions within the executive branch and between it and its few allies in Congress. During his Independence Day address to the nation, Vizcarra made a surprise announcement calling for elections to be held a year early in order to break the stalemate between his administration and Congress.

Since the coming to power in 2016 of Pedro Pablo Kuczynski—Vizcarra’s predecessor who was forced to resign amid a corruption scandal last year—the Congress has been dominated by the populist right-wing party Fuerza Popular (FP). The Fujimorist FP is justifiably hated for exploiting its nearly complete control of the legislature to block anti-corruption legislation and any challenge to its right-wing policies.

The demand for early elections is bound up with the recognition that the entire Peruvian ruling establishment is completely discredited after the revelations of the Lava Jato corruption scandal involving bribes for contracts with the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht. The scandal has resulted in the preliminary detention of four former presidents, one of whom committed suicide to avoid prosecution. The intractable conflict between the executive branch and Congress has led to the conclusion at least by some within Peru’s ruling circles that it is preferable to end the congressional term in advance so as to avoid a complete political collapse after another severe crisis.

On top of this is the state of the economy, with the daily *El Comercio*

explaining that in April and June “national production advanced 1.08 percent, the lowest number since the third trimester of 2009.” This is alarming, as 2009 was the year that Peru was battered by the world economic crisis after Lehman Brothers’ collapse in September 2008.

Vizcarra’s call for early elections, which would take place in April 2020, has been bitterly opposed by his right-wing opponents in Congress, with Mauricio Mulder of APRA declaring that he would seek the impeachment of the president. It has likewise been opposed by his own PPK party caucus members and his vice president, Mercedes Araoz, who declared that the president never consulted her on the proposal.

Araoz, who is both a congresswoman and vice president, has more intimate links to the corporate world than Vizcarra, and it was rumored that she was plotting a “palace coup” with the support of big business and the *fujimoristas* in Congress, in order to become president. This rumor was more or less confirmed when, after the leaks of Vizcarra’s secret meeting with the Arequipa leaders, she and two other congress members announced their resignation from the PPK caucus, clearly aiming to further undermine Vizcarra’s increasingly isolated government.

So far, Vizcarra, who was vice president under Kuczynski, has remained under the radar of the Lava Jato investigation and has postured as a crusader against corruption. As a result, his approval rating is fairly high compared to his predecessors (53 percent according to the latest poll).

But just like his four disgraced predecessors, Vizcarra is defending and deepening the neoliberal policies that have been imposed in Peru since the 1990s. On December 31 the government enacted a labor decree—the National Policy on Competitiveness and Productivity (PNCP)—that would cut compensation for longevity, holidays, social security and other benefits. It also is aimed at facilitating mass layoffs.

The Peruvian pseudo-left, led by former presidential candidate Veronika Mendoza and her Nuevo Peru movement, has made only mild criticisms of this assault on workers’ rights. Meanwhile, in interviews with the media, Mendoza has praised Vizcarra’s call for government reforms, defended him from the political attacks of the *fujimoristas* and lamented the fact that he did not “listen to the people” and shut down the Congress—a completely unconstitutional measure that would set a dangerous precedent for presidential dictatorship.

On Twitter, Mendoza, while denouncing the repression against the Tambo Valley people, declared the suspension of the license for Tia Maria “an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the Tambo Valley struggle and that a mining project cannot be imposed against the people and the environment.”

Meanwhile, Peru’s biggest union confederacy, the CGTP, posted as one of its demands for a “national day of struggle” on August 22 that Vizcarra continue to lead the negotiations in Arequipa.

Both the pseudo-lefts and the unions are determined to subordinate the struggles of the working class and the oppressed to the machinations of Peru’s right-wing president.



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