

Starving Bolivian workers clash with troops deployed by coup regime

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Amid the growth of the COVID-19 epidemic in Bolivia, Jeanine Áñez's self-proclaimed "transitional government" is escalating state repression, sending the military into the streets to crush protests by starving workers.

On Monday night, a protest in K'ara K'ara, a poor neighborhood in the southern part of Cochabamba, Bolivia's fourth-largest city, was brutally repressed by the police and the military. Videos showed the security forces firing teargas grenades into working class homes. The demonstrators demanded that they be released from quarantine in order to work and try to provide food for their families. They also called for the fall of Áñez's government, imposed by a military coup in late 2019.

The protests continued on the following days in Cochabamba. Residents have blockaded the main avenue of K'ara K'ara with rocks since Tuesday, and yesterday demonstrators left the southern neighborhoods, marching towards the center of the city, denouncing the government's starvation policies as well as their lack of access to water.

According to *Los Tiempos*, the mobilization was triggered by the banks imposing charges on outstanding loans. "The government said that we would pay the banks after six months of quarantine, but they are already calling us to get the payments in June. How are we going to pay if we're not working?" one resident said.

These protests express the economic despair that is spreading among the Bolivian working class and peasantry. About 70 percent of Bolivia's workers are in the informal labor market and have lost their income amid the pandemic.

For over a month, workers have been demonstrating in Cochabamba and other cities, such as El Alto. "The

government locked us up, hunger is going to kill us," read a sign in a protest against the quarantine in Ribalta in early April, according to *El País*.

Other protests were registered in La Paz on April 30 by impoverished workers who had been waiting in line for days to receive the miserable bonuses of 500 bolivianos (about US\$70) announced by the government, but which have been repeatedly delayed.

In early May, a video circulated on social media showing a policeman from the Special Operations Tactical Unit (UTOP) committing sexual violence against a woman who was arrested along with dozens of other people for violating the quarantine. Asked by journalists why she had left home, she answered, crying: "I didn't get any bonus and I left today because it was my day to leave, I went to buy some vegetables."

The Áñez government responded to the cries of despair and revolt of the Bolivian population with the creation of a new dictatorial measure designed to exploit the pandemic to further tighten police state control. Decree 4231 criminalizes anyone who "spreads in written, artistic or any other procedure that puts at risk or affects public health, generating uncertainty in the population."

Defending the decree, Minister Yerko Núñez said: "Citizens who are trying, through social networks, to confuse and misinform should be careful. These are the ones who should be concerned, those who want to divide and confront the Bolivians. Journalists should be tranquil."

This dangerous escalation of state repression, cynically justified in the name of containing the advance of the pandemic, has been accompanied, in addition to the policy of hunger, by an absolute disregard for the health of Bolivians.

The coronavirus is advancing rapidly throughout the

country. On Tuesday alone, 275 new cases were registered, and on Thursday the government reported that the total number of cases had risen to over 3,000 and deaths to more than 140. However, more than in any other South American country, the real figures are obscured by the extremely low rate of testing: 655 tests per 1 million people. Infections and deaths are undoubtedly many times higher than the number confirmed.

In hospitals there is a general lack of essential resources, from ventilators to personal protective equipment. Nurses from Montero hospital, who also demonstrated in the streets, exposed through photos and videos on social media how they are forced to wash their disposable gowns to reuse them.

This week, the government approved the use of a vermifuge, Ivermectin, an anti-parasitic drug that has no proven effectiveness in the treatment of COVID-19.

The government's disastrous response was also expressed in a rebellion by thousands of inmates at the Palmasola Rehabilitation Center in Santa Cruz de la Sierra last Monday after the death of at least two inmates from COVID-19. The prison is the largest in Bolivia and is packed with 6,000 people, about 40 percent of the country's entire prison population, more than 70 percent of them being held without any sentence. The inmates protested, chanting "We want to live!" before being dispersed by a police invasion.

Recent events demonstrate explicitly that Áñez and the Bolivian military have no intention of constituting merely a "transitional government," but rather plan to remain in power indefinitely.

General elections, scheduled for May 3, were postponed indefinitely by the Supreme Electoral Court after the first cases of the pandemic. Proposals by the National Assembly to hold the elections within 90 days have been persistently rejected by Áñez, who says they can only take place "when it is no longer a health risk."

While the government feigns concerns over public health in order to block elections and remain in power, it has already advanced plans to resume activities in many branches of the economy to guarantee capitalist profit interests. Since the beginning of the week, a return to work in the mines, factories and manufacturing, among other "strategic" sectors, has been approved by a decree issued by the labor minister, overriding quarantine measures imposed by

municipalities.

The postponement of the elections in Bolivia serves the interests of the national bourgeoisie and its accommodation with US imperialism, which was underscored by the approval of Donald Trump expressed directly to Áñez. "I am grateful for the call from the US President, @realDonaldTrump, to express his democratic solidarity with the Bolivian people in the fight against COVID-19 and in the bilateral agenda we have in development," she wrote on her Twitter account.

To defend their most basic right to life, the Bolivian masses are pushed to fight the regime installed by the military coup with US support.

But this task cannot be carried out under the leadership of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) of ousted President Evo Morales and the unions. These institutions are subordinated to and inseparable from the Bolivian national bourgeoisie. Because of that, they have paved the way for Áñez's rise to power, abandoning the Bolivian masses to fight the coup in the streets. Their present opposition to the government is based on factions within the Bolivian bourgeoisie and their efforts to reach a grand national agreement that involves those who participated in the coup.

The struggle against the coup regime can be advanced only on the basis of the political independence of the Bolivian working class in alliance with the peasantry, and under an international socialist revolutionary leadership that promotes its unification with the workers of Latin America and the whole world.



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