

Peru tops half a million coronavirus cases as political crisis deepens

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With COVID-19 infections and deaths having soared since the economy began to reopen in July, Peru's political and social crises have escalated. Strikes have broken out in the mining sector over high rates of infections, and an August 9 clash between indigenous protesters and police in the hard-hit Amazon region left four indigenous workers dead.

With 796 COVID-19 deaths per million inhabitants, Peru has the highest mortality rate in all the Americas and the second-highest in the world, trailing only Belgium. Its total number of coronavirus cases has topped 535,000, with a record of over 10,000 new cases being recorded on Sunday. The Ministry of Health (Minsa) has recorded over 26,000 deaths, although the real number is believed to be twice as high because of excess deaths that were not investigated.

Since the beginning of the re-opening of the economy, the number of infections jumped by 78 percent in six weeks, reports *El Comercio*. There has also been a 75 percent increase in infections among children and adolescents.

In response to this uncontrolled spread of the pandemic, President Martín Vizcarra has ordered the reinstatement of a blanket quarantine on Sundays only. This means “all family and social reunions are prohibited,” and parks will remain closed. As for the rest of the week, work will continue. This comes on top of rolling lockdowns in 15 of Peru's 25 regions. In the capital of Lima and elsewhere, militarized units of the Peruvian National Police have been deployed to rigorously enforce the Sunday curfew.

The government's contention is that the deadly virus is being spread primarily by social gatherings between friends and families—not by herding Peruvians back into the mines and other workplaces.

Within the working class, however, there is growing resistance to the homicidal conditions of work imposed by the employers and backed by the government. Miners at

the Minera Aurifera Retamas S.A. (MARSA) gold and silver mine walked out last week after 280 miners had contracted the coronavirus on the job. They denounced the owners of the mine, one of the largest underground mines in the country, for failing to provide the most minimal sanitary conditions. In addition to the enforcement of basic health norms, one of their demands was an end to the “hot bed” (*camas calientes*) practice, under which workers from the morning and evening shifts are forced to share the same beds.

The MARSA miners indicated that their strike could continue following the arrest of the leader of the local union, Luis Cerna Polo.

Miners have protested and struck elsewhere as the coronavirus cases and deaths mount. At the Uchucchacua, about 150 miles northeast of the capital, workers have reported 150 infections within their ranks. At the Cerro Lindo mine, 700 workers were quarantined because of COVID-19 symptoms, while at the Cerro Corona mine, 150 workers were evacuated after coming down with the disease. At both facilities, miners are forced to share crowded quarters.

Meanwhile, in the Amazon region, indigenous protesters took over an oil complex at Lot 95, located in the Loreto region, to protest against the failure of the government to provide aid amidst one of the most virulent outbreaks of the pandemic. Across the Amazon basin, there have been more than 100,000 infections and at least 3,000 COVID-19 fatalities. With an indigenous population of 330,000 people, this means that nearly a third have been infected and nearly one out of 100 have died.

Security forces responded with brutal repression to the indigenous protest, killing three people outright and mortally wounding another. Seventeen other protesters were wounded.

The Lot 95 oil facility is owned by the Canadian-based

transnational PetroTal, which restarted production last month over the protests of the local population, who fear oil workers returning to the northern Peruvian jungle will bring the coronavirus with them. The government and the transnationals have treated the indigenous population as little more than an obstacle to resource extraction and profits.

Vizcarra has seen his approval rating plummet in the face of the spiraling COVID-19 toll and the reopening of the economy, falling from 83 percent in June to barely 56 percent today.

On July 1, Vizcarra carried out a cabinet shakeup in the face of his government's mounting crisis, tapping Pedro Cateriano as his new prime minister. The Congress, however, rejected the appointment by 54-37 in an August 4 vote of no-confidence.

While Vizcarra denounced the rejection as a political maneuver, critics faulted Cateriano for delivering a speech to the Congress that too openly promoted the interests of the mining transnationals and other sectors of big business, without even feigning concern for the suffering of the masses of Peruvian workers and poor under conditions of the pandemic, mass unemployment and deepening poverty.

Subsequently, Vizcarra proposed retired general Walter Martos, the former defense minister, as his new prime minister. Martos was approved with the widest congressional support seen in 50 years: 115 votes in favor, five against and four abstentions.

His elevation to the prime minister's post is part of the increasing dominance of the military within Vizcarra's cabinet. Three of the 19 cabinet seats are now occupied by active-duty or retired generals: that of the prime minister and the secretaries of Defense, and National Security, Army Gen. Jorge Luis Chávez Cresta and Air Force Lt. Gen. Jorge Montoya Pérez, respectively.

Vizcarra is keeping on his initial pick, Pedro Cateriano, the darling of the Peruvian big business lobby Confiep (Confederación Nacional de Instituciones Empresariales Privadas), as a liaison with the powerful mining sector.

Vizcarra's commitment to mining and foreign capital was further demonstrated with his choice of Miguel Incháustegui for the Energy and Mining cabinet post. Incháustegui's experience includes having been director of Turmalina Metals Corp and Cañariaco Copper Peru. He also worked at Gold Fields and Lumina Copper.

In his speech to the Congress, Gen. Martos acknowledged the backwardness of Peru's economy, which was masked during the period of the commodities

boom when the country recorded an average 6.3 percent annual growth between 2002 and 2014. He noted that this year alone public spending has dropped 35 percent.

As a remedy for the country's deepening economic crisis—the central bank projects a 12 percent contraction this year—Martos proposed injecting billions of dollars into PYMES (Small and Medium Size Enterprises). While this sector accounts for 86 percent of private employment and generates 30 percent of GDP, statistics show that most PYMES go bankrupt in few years, with even more daunting prospects in face of the pandemic.

Martos cast the struggle against the pandemic as “a war that radiates to all areas of national life,” emphasizing that he was speaking “as a proud member of our forces of order...”

The retired general stressed the modernization and buildup of the security forces as central to this “war,” with proposals for the digitalization of police operations, the opening of 28 new police stations by December 2020 and the deployment of “the Armed Forces, with the support of night-watch [civilian] Municipal patrols, in order to increase the number of troops and the frequency of rounds, with special strategic actions focused on the places of greatest criminal incidence.”

In Peru, as in the rest of Latin America, the capitalist ruling class and its transnational partners are leaning ever more heavily on the military and police forces as they confront the threat of an explosion of the class struggle, driven by mass unemployment, social inequality and the criminal back-to-work drive that is claiming ever greater numbers of COVID-19 victims.



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