Amid raging pandemic, Peruvian police evict thousands of working class families

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With Peru's COVID-19 pandemic spiraling out of control and the country's health care system in a state of collapse, the government has sent in police squads to evict thousands of homeless and unemployed people from land they had occupied in and around the capital of Lima.

Peru has recorded the highest number of COVID deaths per million of any country in Latin America, while simultaneously suffering the continent's sharpest economic decline as a result of the pandemic. As a result, thousands of working class and poor families, left without jobs or roofs over their heads, have taken over land and erected makeshift homes on the outskirts of Lima and other Peruvian cities.

In March and April of this year, between 4,000 and 10,000 families set up shanty homes on the Lomo de Corvina and El Morro Solar hills, while another 100 families moved onto the small, polluted beach of La Chira, all located south of Lima. They constructed houses using materials such as stones, plastic and sticks, along with blankets, tents and cardboard.

Homeless families also set up structures on land in Jicamarca to the east of the capital city. Likewise, 300 people moved into the Hijo de la Caledonia II settlement, where houses have been built with prefabricated materials and corrugated metal roofs. "We have talked with the authorities. We are not invaders, and we have been there for more than two months. The only thing we ask is that the state gives us its support," a woman commented to the daily *La República*.

The land occupations threatened to spread to San Cristobal hill, an icon of Lima where a large illuminated statue of Christ on the cross towers over the city. The hill is located in the Rimac district, originally built by the Spanish nobility in colonial times and today has been turned into an overcrowded and impoverished workers district.

The corporate media immediately denounced the invasions as illegal and demanded the Peruvian National Police (PNP) evict the settlers. They invoked a law passed in 2015 by Peru's notoriously corrupt congress, which punishes land invasions with prison sentences.

With the aim of gaining time while an assault was being prepared, initially the authorities of the affected districts said the PNP would act with caution, respecting citizens' rights. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

In numerous evictions, police resorted to force, firing tear gas at families, including children and the elderly, who resisted the orders to leave. To defend themselves, families threw stones at the attacking police. Several arrests were made. The operation was conducted by more than 2,300 police officers.

"We need a roof over our heads. We are ... sleeping (on Morro Solar). They are not going to remove us because we are in need. Even though we don't have running water or electricity, we'll find a way out. Every invasion starts like this, from scratch," a man who had come with his wife and children told *La República*.

People evicted from the Lomo de Corvina hill are now camping in the streets of Villa El Salvador, a working class district in the southern cone of Lima. "We will be there every day until they give us a small piece of land. We have nowhere to live. We have no money; we haven't eaten since yesterday. I have my 13-year-old daughter, and she is not studying," said a woman who was evicted.

Another woman said she was evicted by her landlord in the Ventanilla district, located to the north of Lima about 10 kilometers from Lomo de Corvina, because she could not pay the monthly rent. A third woman stated that all her relatives had lost their jobs.

Miserable living conditions have led to the occupation of land reserved for real estate development projects in other cities.

In Iquitos, on the banks of the Amazon River, the police evicted 2,000 people who took over land dedicated to specialty crops.

Likewise, the government of the department of La Libertad, in northern Peru, reported the removal of "various rustic constructions and other acts of invasion, committed by those who were trying to take over land in the Huanchaco Sea Project Area."

Showing contempt for the lives of families who have nowhere to live, the head of the Secretariat of Social Management and Dialogue of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM), Gisselle Huamaní, said of those being evicted by the police, "They should be the ones to leave the place and return to their original homes."

It apparently did not occur to her that these people have no homes that they can return to precisely because they have lost their jobs and are homeless. This is the result of the criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic by a corrupt government in the service of the Peruvian oligarchy and the transnational banks and mining companies.

Invoking the Constitution enacted in 1993 under the authoritarian regime of President Alberto Fujimori, which favored foreign and national investments at the expense of workers' rights, the government declared: "Today in Peru there is no legal basis for expropriating land. This is an attack against private property in Peru and does not comply with the Constitution, which is above any law. It is an openly illegal project."

"It only benefits land traffickers and causes families to live in precarious conditions and without basic services for several years," stated the Minister of Housing Solange Fernandez, as if those occupying the land had access to better conditions somewhere else.

Fernandez's statement was quickly refuted by those occupying the land. "There are no land traffickers here, we just want to live because before we were in a rented room that charged us 300 soles (US$ 80) and, due to the pandemic, we no longer have a job, they threw us out. I have been a tenant, we have been on the street, but now we occupy

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this place peacefully," one of the occupiers told *América Noticias*.

To cope with the lack of cheap land and affordable housing, for many years working class families have been moving outside of Lima, looking for a space where they can afford to build a home for their children. Traveling south of Lima, one sees one settlement after another. In many cases, these residents are forced to commute 60 kilometers to the capital in search of work.

The precarious houses are built on barren hills because almost all of the coastline, up to 120 kilometers away from Lima, has been taken over by the bourgeoisie, building private beach-houses—some valued at more than US$ 500,000—with non-owners denied access to the beaches.

The invasions are one more expression of the inability of Peruvian capitalism to satisfy the basic needs of the working class and the poor. The eight-year deceleration of the country's economy has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. The Peruvian state is collapsing under the weight of decades of corruption in which every living former president is implicated.

The health situation is out of control. According to the Ministry of Health (MINSA), as of May 22, the number of recorded deaths due to COVID-19 had reached 68,358, and the number of infections 1,926,923. "Excess deaths," a concept developed by an economic model that includes 121 socioeconomic variables, indicates that the true COVID-19 death toll for Peru is at least three times higher than the one reported by MINSA.

Government incompetence has led to serious delays in vaccinating the population. Besides "essential personnel," only those 60 years or older are scheduled to be vaccinated. Having money matters. The deadly virus attacks workers more severely than the wealthy, many of whom have flown to the US to be vaccinated.

Peru's Central Reserve Bank (BCR) indicated that GDP contracted by 30.2 percent in the second quarter of 2020. Approximately nine million workers have lost their jobs since the start of the pandemic in March of last year, while an estimated 3,330,000 have fallen into poverty, bringing the share of the population living below the poverty line to over 30 percent.

The precarious economic situation led BCR President Julio Velarde to admit, "It is the biggest fall in the last hundred years, really dramatic."

As a faithful servant of the national bourgeoisie, Velarde gave an optimistic projection aimed at preventing panic among foreign and domestic investors. He stated that the BCR was projecting an 11.25 percent increase in GDP for 2021. This figure can only be met if the government carries out criminal efforts to reopen the economy at the expense of more people dying. April 2021 was the worst month of the pandemic, with 8,255 dead, surpassing the previous record in June 2020 of 8,165 dead.

The national currency, the nuevo sol, has hit historic lows against the US dollar. In the last 12 months, it dropped 11.46 percent. And since the Peruvian economic slowdown began eight years ago, it has lost a third of its value. As result, prices are rising, particularly for basic food items.

The confrontation over land occupations is one more expression of the desperation and anger of millions of working class families who for the past 14 months have been living under nightly curfews and total lockdown on Sundays.

Since the end of 2020, hundreds of thousands of youth, university and high school students occupied the streets to protest an antidemocratic congressional coup. This was followed by agricultural workers blocking the main access roads into Lima for more than a month in a struggle over wages. Drivers in the capital have staged several strikes. Miners have struck over the spread of COVID-19 infections and deaths in the mining camps, and municipal workers have walked out over unpaid wages.

Peru will stage a second round of its presidential elections on June 6, with neither of the two candidates offering any alternative for the Peruvian working class.

The petty-bourgeois populist demagogue and rural teachers union leader Pedro Castillo of the Peru Libre party has sought since his first-round victory to reassure the Peruvian bourgeoisie and the transnational mining companies that he has no intention of implementing his party's campaign promises of nationalizations. Instead, he has merely proposed a more rigorous enforcement of tax laws, while disassociating himself from "extremists" and declaring himself a "democrat" and a "Catholic."

Castillo is running against the candidate of Fuerza Popular, Keiko Fujimori. The corrupt and fascistic daughter of the former dictatorial President Alberto Fujimori, now serving a 25-year sentence for crimes against humanity, she is running a rabidly anticommunist campaign.

According to the latest poll by the Institute of Peruvian Studies, Castillo is leading with 34 percent against Fujimori with 30 percent. One-third of those polled indicated they would cast blank or spoiled ballots in protest. This figure is remarkably high given that elections are less than two weeks away. But it still underestimates the popular anger against a capitalist society that has driven millions of working class families and small business owners into poverty, while making a tiny minority of the population very wealthy.

Given the growing political instability and popular anger, Peru is ripe for the kind of mass uprising that has erupted in the neighboring country of Colombia.

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