

Peru's Pedro Castillo's first 100 days: Shattering the illusions promoted by Jacobin and the pseudo-left

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Pedro Castillo, the former rural teachers union leader elected as president of Peru, traveled to the southern city of Ayacucho on November 10 to deliver a speech marking his first 100 days in office.

Castillo's narrow election victory over the far-right candidate Keiko Fujimori and his taking office last July was greeted by sections of the pseudo-left internationally as a victory for the Peruvian working class and oppressed. Some went so far as to hail a second coming of the so-called "Pink Tide," i.e., the wave of bourgeois nationalist governments that came to power in Latin America at the turn of the century on the back of the commodities boom. Most prominent among them was that of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, who advanced the notion of a "Bolivarian revolution" and "21st century socialism."

One of the most enthusiastic cheerleaders for Castillo has been *Jacobin* magazine, the semi-official organ of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which proclaimed in a headline that "Peru's Pedro Castillo Can Break With Neoliberalism for Good."

If the first 100 days of the Castillo presidency have served any purpose, it is to mercilessly shatter such ill-founded illusions peddled by the pseudo-left.

Castillo's speech in Ayacucho sounded much like those he delivered on the campaign trail, long on empty and, in the final analysis, right-wing populist rhetoric, and short on any concrete policies to address the grinding poverty and vast social inequality, immeasurably deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic, that plague the masses of Peruvian workers and rural oppressed.

He addressed himself to "all men and women of Peru, the powers and institutions of the state, the political forces, the businessmen, the workers, to tell them that now is the time for national reconstruction." According to the state-run daily *El Peruano*, Castillo issued a special appeal to businessmen to "invest in the country and generate decent jobs for Peruvians, those who have always demonstrated their drive and who maintained productivity and the advance of the country during the pandemic."

He made no mention of the cost of this effort, enforced in the interests of the mining transnationals and big business and driven by popular desperation born of poverty and hunger. With more than 200,000 COVID-19 deaths, Peru ranks as the country with the highest rate of fatalities per capita in the world – nearly 6,000 per million, as compared to roughly 2,400 for the United States. According to health experts, the Castillo government has made no changes to the homicidal policies pursued by its predecessors in relation to the pandemic.

In his first hundred days in office, Castillo has managed to move faster to the right than any of his predecessors. He has sacked virtually every member of his cabinet to accommodate relentless pressure from the Peruvian right, which continues to seek his ouster through a parliamentary

coup.

This began with his foreign minister, Hector Béjar, who was accused of offending the honor of the Peruvian Navy and ousted before the new government was more than a month old. He replaced his prime minister based on unsubstantiated charges of a decades-old association with the Sendero Luminoso guerrilla movement and, most recently, dismissed his defense minister, who was accused of interfering with the "institutionality" of the armed forces.

Obsequious support for Peruvian military

Castillo has missed no opportunity to deliver obsequious declarations of his own loyalty to the Peruvian military. In one recent statement, he declared his "unconditional respect for the institutionality of the armed forces," i.e., their autonomy from civilian rule, while lauding the military as "the guarantors of territorial integrity, the rule of law and constitutional order."

Last month, he went so far as to call the Army into the streets on the pretext of combatting crime. His action followed by only weeks that of President Guillermo Lasso, the right-wing banker and former Coca-Cola executive, who called out the Ecuadorian Army on the same pretext.

Also sacked in the past week was the secretary general of the office of the presidency, Bruno Pacheco, who was also accused of interfering with the "institutionality" of the military in the area of officer promotions. Subsequently, a search by prosecutors and police investigators found \$20,000 in cash in his personal bathroom at the presidential palace.

Named to replace Pacheco as chief presidential adviser is Carlos Jaico of the right-wing populist party Alianza para el Progreso. On LinkedIn, he describes himself as a corporate lawyer who "works with global businesses, executing strategies and negotiations for them that significantly improve their value chain and competitive advantage ..."

The only senior government official with reliable job security has been Julio Velarde, the right-wing economist who chairs the Central Reserve Bank of Peru. He has held his position at the helm of the Peruvian economy since 2006. This champion of transnational and Peruvian capitalist interests has been kept in place to signal the Castillo government's commitment to making no fundamental changes to the "neoliberal" policies pursued over the three decades following the rise of the dictatorship of the now imprisoned Alberto Fujimori. Upon being sworn in for a new term last month, Velarde warned that Peru's mining protests were "affecting the perception of the country in terms of future investments," and echoed calls by the mining companies for the

government to “re-establish order.”

To the same end, Castillo tapped Pedro Franke, an ex-World Bank official, as his minister of economy and finance, traveling with him within his first weeks in office to Washington and New York City to reassure the State Department, IMF and Wall Street of his government’s commitment to the profit interests of international and Peruvian capital.

In one brief departure from script, Castillo and one of his ministers spoke of nationalizing the private gas consortium Camisea, owned by US and Argentine conglomerates. In response to an uproar from the right, Franke was brought out to explain that the government was using the word “nationalization” merely to express its belief that the company should operate in “the service of Peruvians” and, “in no way does it mean taking state control over a private activity.”

So jarring was the lurch to the right by Castillo that the party that ran him as its presidential candidate, Perú Libre, called last month for a vote of “no confidence” in his government, with its congressional delegation splitting roughly down the middle. Castillo has done everything in his power to placate the demands of the Peruvian ruling elite that he distance himself from Perú Libre leader Vladimir Cerrón, a corrupt regionalist official and populist who has been cast by the Peruvian right and the media as a “communist” bogeyman.

Among those voting against the government was Castillo’s ex-chief minister Guido Bellido, who stated that the president was not a socialist or even on the left, but just a “basic trade unionist.”

Castillo is following the well-worn path of previous left-talking Latin American presidents, including most similarly Peru’s Ollanta Humala, who went from flirting with “Bolivarian socialism” before his election in 2011, to unleashing savage violence against the working class in defense of corporate interests once in office. Under conditions of unprecedented social inequality and deepening poverty, it is only a matter of time before the Castillo government carries out similar attacks. Already last month, it dispatched the Peruvian National Police to Ayacucho to break up a mining protest with tear gas, clubs and rubber bullets.

Castillo’s turn to the right and his failure to carry out any significant policies in the interests of Peruvian working people have cost him significant support. A poll released by the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos (IEP) on October 31 showed that his approval rating in the impoverished south of the country, his principal base of support, had fallen from 58 percent to 42 percent over the course of the previous month.

Jacobin’s alibis for Castillo’s rush to the right

Castillo’s pseudo-left cheerleaders have shown no such qualms, however. *Jacobin* magazine, which lavished coverage on the new supposed “left” president and champion against “neo-liberalism,” has, in the period following Castillo’s victory at the polls, repeatedly offered political alibis for the incoming president shifting sharply to the right. In a September 4 article, it opined that the challenges Castillo faces in delivering “social change” will “come down to the minutiae of everyday politics rather than ideological grandstanding. The success — and survival — of any democratic government in Peru often has more to do with navigating a minefield of petty corruption scandals, glad-handing key allies, and projecting an image of strength while under constant siege.”

In other words, the supposed victory of the “left” in Peru can only be consolidated in the form of another corrupt bourgeois government, which is already taking shape in Lima.

Nicolas Allen, a *Jacobin* contributing editor and the managing editor of the Spanish-language *Jacobin América Latina*, became the point man in this political operation. In a July interview published by *Jacobin*, Allen

declared that, with Castillo’s electoral victory, “There may be something like a new Pink Tide underway.”

As for the results of the first “Pink Tide,” Allen’s pseudo-left jargon—“a ‘hegemonic draw’ between insurgent left-wing governments and a capitalist restoration”—only serves to cover up for corrupt bourgeois governments, like those of Lula, Maduro and Correa, whose populist rhetoric gave way to structural adjustment programs and frontal attacks on the working class in the face of a receding commodities boom.

In regard to the prospects for the new “left” government in Peru, Allen states that its fate “ultimately depends on how far the Peruvian people are willing to accompany a process of radical transformation,” adding, “That answer might not satisfy some armchair leftists ...”

He goes on to state that Peru is “a country where neoliberalism has seeped into the popular mentality and shaped so much of what passes for common sense—even if that common sense has been shaken. It’s not the kind of thing that can be undone through a set of well-crafted progressive policies imposed by presidential fiat.”

In other words, Castillo’s rush to the right is the fault of the Peruvian masses and their neoliberalist “popular mentality.” When he refers to “armchair leftists,” what he really has in mind is anyone beginning not from this supposed “popular mentality” as a justification for supporting a bourgeois government, but rather from the profound objective crisis of Peruvian and world capitalism and the necessity of building a revolutionary socialist leadership in the working class.

The foreign policy of the DSA, as expressed in *Jacobin* and its Latin American editions, is an extension of the organization’s domestic policy. As a faction of the Democratic Party, the DSA is dedicated to lending this 200-year-old instrument of imperialist reaction—responsible for scores of fascist-military coups, invasions and CIA destabilization operations in Latin America over the past century—a “left” face, as well as to propping up the corporatist AFL-CIO unions as they confront an ever-widening rebellion by militant rank-and-file workers.

In Latin America, the DSA functions as what amounts to “State Department socialists.” They promote the likes of Castillo in Peru and Lula in Brazil as a means of suppressing an uprising from below, subordinating the working class to supposedly “left” bourgeois regimes with which Washington can do business. In its coverage of Castillo’s election, *Jacobin* made no mention of Washington being among the first to congratulate him, having been suitably impressed by his gratuitous denunciation of Venezuela’s Nicolás Maduro during the course of his campaign.

A new revolutionary leadership in the working class can be built only in implacable hostility to political tendencies like *Jacobin* and the DSA, whose politics reflect the social interests of a privileged layer of the upper middle class and serve the deepest needs of imperialism. This is the struggle being waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, which alone advances a genuine internationalist socialist program to unite the workers of Peru and Latin America with workers in the United States and internationally in a common fight to put an end to capitalism.



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