

Castillo government unleashes police against mining protest in Peru

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Units of the Peruvian National Police (PNP) attacked a group of peasant community members protesting against the MMG Las Bambas mining company early Thursday morning, arresting five and leaving several wounded, Peru's Observatory of Mining Conflicts (OCM) reported.

The peasants, from the Pumamarca community in the Cotabambas province of the Peruvian southern-central region of Apurímac, where the mine is located, had occupied what they say was communal land taken from them by the Chinese-owned mining company. They had burned down a security gate leading to the area and defied earlier attempts to disperse them with tear gas.

The MMG mining company claims that the land had been legally purchased from former leaders of the peasant community.

The use of force ordered by the government of Peru's purportedly "left" President Pedro Castillo came on the eve of today's deadline set by MMG for the complete shutdown of its operations at the mine, which is responsible for 2 percent of the world's copper supply, in response to protracted protests.

The confrontation has brought into stark relief the irresolvable contradiction between Castillo's unfulfilled populist promises to govern in the interests of Peru's impoverished majority, and his declarations of allegiance to the profit interests of Peruvian and transnational capitalist enterprises, particularly in the country's key mining sector.

The MMG confrontation is only one of some 199 ongoing protests across the country registered by the government ombudsman Defensoría del Pueblo, which described nearly 65 percent of them as "socio-environmental," pitting impoverished communities against extractive industries.

The Las Bambas protest actions have centered on a month-long blockade by peasants from Chumbivilcas province in the region of Cuzco that began on November 20, cutting several points on Peru's southern mining corridor used to bring in supplies and workers and ship out copper concentrate bound for the Pacific port of Matarani, and on to China. Protests have continued virtually without interruption since last July, before Castillo's inauguration.

MMG's threatened shutdown is aimed at pressuring the Castillo government into forcing an end to the blockades by

declaring a state of emergency and sending in a heavier police as well as military presence to suppress the protests, as previous governments have done, including in 2015, when five peasant community members were shot to death.

The government has predicted that it will reach a negotiated settlement over the weekend. But Peru's Prime Minister Mirtha Vasquez, speaking to reporters Wednesday, warned that "we cannot sustain this situation for much longer."

The leadership of the Chumbivilcas communities have protested MMG's use of what they insist are communal lands to run a constant stream of heavy trucks on dirt roads through their villages, sending up dust clouds that blight their crops, reducing air quality and increasing noise, while providing no benefits to the region's impoverished inhabitants. They further charge that MMG changed plans submitted by the mine's previous owner, the Anglo-Swiss Xstrata mining company, that called for the copper concentrate to be shipped by pipeline to another facility in Cuzco, switching to overland transportation with no new environmental impact assessment.

Protest leaders have demanded that the mining company award the Chumbivilcas communities contracts for trucking, road maintenance and other services, as well as funds for community development. MMG has offered little in the way of compromise in talks organized by the Castillo government, counting on pressure from the mining industry and other big business and financial sectors to bring the government to its side.

Other peasant communities in Apumíra closest to the mine have also called upon the government to take action to shut down the protests, claiming that they endangered revenues flowing from the mine. No doubt there is also fear that grants, tax income and contracts for Chumbivilcas communities will cut into their own deals with MMG.

Apurímac's Governor Baltazar Lantarón demanded that the government "reassert the principle of the country's authority, that there cannot be an abuse of protest," while describing the demands made by the Chumbivilcas communities as "unviable."

The union representing Las Bambas copper miners has essentially lined up with MMG in demanding an end to the blockades. Erick Ramos Luna, the secretary general of the

United Union of MMG Las Bambas Workers, told *RPPnews* that the protests were placing 9,000 jobs at risk, including those of miners and contractors, and further endangering 75,000 Peruvians whose livelihoods are directly or indirectly dependent upon the mine continuing operations. He insisted that the peasant actions could not be allowed to interfere with “the right to work.” The union staged a protest this week in Lima demanding that Castillo act.

The heaviest pressure by far, however, has come from Peruvian and foreign capitalist interests, which have all lined up with the Chinese mining company.

Raúl Jacob, the president of the National Society of Mining, Petroleum and Energy (SNMPE), denounced the protesters for carrying out “violent acts.” He warned, “We will not allow Peru to become a country in which mining companies are blocked and consider pulling out.”

Oscar Carpio, president of Confiep (National Confederation of Private Business Institutions), charged that the protests were hindering “the generation of foreign currency for the country,” while blaming the Castillo government for appointing “officials and advisors who are opposed to the development of the industry.”

Even as the controversy over Las Bambas continued to escalate, the Peruvian Congress voted to block a key element of Castillo’s reformist program, stripping from its proposed fiscal and tax reform legislation the government’s right to increase taxes on the mining industry and on Peru’s wealthiest through changes in capital gains taxes. The measure was passed overwhelmingly, with 98 in favor and 18 against, with one abstention. Castillo’s own Perú Libre party split its vote down the middle on blocking the tax increases.

Simultaneously, Julio Velarde, the right-wing economist who Castillo kept in place as chairman of the Central Reserve Bank of Peru, signaled that the government’s proposal for an increase in the minimum wage should be quashed, claiming that it would benefit only a minority of workers in the formal sector, while placing an undue burden on “small business.”

Velarde, who was kept at the helm of Peruvian financial policy as a signal of Castillo’s subservience to capitalist interests, warned after his reappointment that Peru’s mining protests were “affecting the perception of the country in terms of future investments,” and that the government had to “re-establish order.”

Castillo has carried out a continuous turn to the right since his election in an attempt to placate his opponents in the Peruvian ruling class, jettisoning virtually every one of his major cabinet ministers. He survived a December 7 vote in Congress to initiate impeachment proceedings by a comfortable margin of 76 to 46 to reject the resolution.

Nonetheless, Castillo’s far-right opponents led by Fuerza Popular, the party led by Keiko Fujimori, whom he defeated by a narrow margin to win the presidency, have refused from the beginning to accept the legitimacy of his election. They are

continuing attempts to oust Castillo, no matter how much he concedes.

A new avenue in this attempt to overturn the election may have been opened by the Peruvian attorney general’s office presenting influence-peddling and conflict-of-interest charges against Castillo in connection with his personal dealings with a businesswoman who secured a government contract for the construction of a bridge over the Huallaga River. While the alleged corruption is penny-ante compared to Keiko Fujimori’s own bribe-taking—and that of most of Peru’s living ex-presidents—from the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht, her party will undoubtedly use it in a renewed bid for a parliamentary coup.

Alongside the right-wing impeachment maneuvers in the Peruvian Congress, fascistic extra-parliamentary groups linked to former members of the armed forces have become increasingly aggressive, denouncing Castillo as a “communist” and a “terrorist” and demanding his immediate removal from office.

The recent developments in Peru—including the Castillo government’s failure to respond to the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed more lives per capita in Peru than in any other country on the planet—have demonstrated once again that neither the anemic present-day incarnations of bourgeois nationalism nor the bankrupt trade union leaderships and their pseudo-left allies can provide any road forward for the working class and the impoverished rural masses.

Overcoming the oppression and exploitation of transnational capital and its national partners is possible only by means of the politically independent struggle of the working class, leading the oppressed masses behind it on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. This requires the building of a new revolutionary leadership in the working class, a Peruvian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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