Peruvian miners strike over COVID surge

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Thousands of workers struck Tuesday at the Quellaveco mine in Peru's southern region of Moquegua denouncing the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 in the mining camps and the failure of the Anglo-American mining corporation and its contractors to enforce even minimal health protocols.

Chanting "Antes que el dinero, nuestra salud es primero" (Before money, our health comes first), they marched off their jobs and out of the mining camp to demand that transnational mining giant take responsibility for sick miners and construction workers at the site.

"We demand better treatment, as the company is not complying with biosecurity protocols," one worker told the local media. "There are many with positive cases who have slept for days in the tents of healthy people. They must take measures like isolation and the evacuation of these cases to not spread the virus, but they don't do it."

The protest began among employees of the Peruvian mine engineering company Cumbra and spread throughout the camp.

Under conditions in which the mine workers sleep four and five to a room, the failure of the employers to remove and isolate those infected with COVID is criminal.

Several hundred sick workers who have been removed have been loaded onto buses and driven to the local bus station where they are dumped to make their way home, further spreading the virus among the local population and their own families, particularly children, who have yet to be vaccinated. This in turn has caused protests among residents of the area.

Miners report being required to sign sworn statements that they will not hold the employers responsible for COVID deaths and illnesses at the site.

The miners are demanding that infected workers be quarantined at local hotels and regularly tested until they can return to work, without losing their jobs or their pay.

The miners' protest came as the Omicron variant is fueling an uncontrolled third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Peru. The deadly virus has already claimed 203,750 lives in Peru, according to official figures, giving it the highest fatality rate per capita of any country in the world.

Moquegua, where the miners struck, is one of 18 regions in the country where the number of new infections in recent days has already surpassed those recorded during the deadly second wave of the pandemic. Fatalities in Peru rose above the 100 mark on Monday for the first time in six months, and hospitals are threatened with collapse as patient numbers surge and growing numbers of health care workers fall victim to the virus.

The government of President Pedro Castillo announced on Wednesday the extension by another 180 days of a public health state of emergency that had been set to expire on March 1. The cabinet meeting where the decision was taken was attended virtually by the country's health minister, Hernando Cevallos, who is recovering from COVID.

Despite this extension, the government is moving ahead with plans to bring children back into classrooms beginning in March and has refused to take any measures that would infringe on the profit interests of Peruvian big business and the transnational corporations engaged in exploiting the country's mineral wealth.

The supposedly "left" government of former rural teachers union leader President Pedro Castillo has, like its predecessors, pursued a vaccine-only strategy in relation to the pandemic to ensure that all economic activity remains unimpeded.

This is particularly true in the mining sector, which the Peruvian government decreed as an "essential

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industry” from the start of the pandemic, allowing the spread of death and disease among miners and residents of the impoverished Andean mining regions.

The Quellaveco miners’ protest represents a challenge not only to the homicidal indifference of Anglo-American and other corporations to the lives and health of Peruvian workers. It also comes into direct conflict with the entire strategy of the Castillo government, which is relying on increased production and high commodity prices to generate higher tax revenues that in turn can be used to stave off a social explosion.

According to a recent report from the Peruvian Ministry of Energy and Mines (MINEM), tax proceeds from the industry increased 60 percent in 2021, adding up to 6.6 billion soles ($1.67bn), up from the 4.41 billion ($1.11bn) reported last year. The increased revenues reflect high production, rising prices and a profit boom for copper miners and other sections of the industry.

To placate the mining corporations, Castillo disavowed early on any pretense of nationalizing Peru’s lucrative extractive industries. Meanwhile, his limited proposals to increase the tax rate on mining profits has been stymied by his right-wing opponents in the Peruvian Congress, who are continuing their efforts to secure his impeachment.

In place of talking about increasing state control over mining, Castillo has shifted to vague rhetoric about securing “social and environmental commitment” from the mining corporations and ensuring that the mines produce “social profitability.”

While trying to negotiate an end to protests by peasant communities against mining pollution that have hobbled production at a number of pits, most significantly the giant Las Bambas mine owned by the Chinese corporation MMG, in practice, Castillo’s government has tied its future ever more tightly to the profit interests of the mining transnationals.

The Quellaveco mining project is key to this capitalist program. Castillo’s finance minister Pedro Francke hailed its near completion at an end of the year press conference, announcing that the $5.5 billion project would begin production in the second quarter of 2022, with a projected production of 300,000 tons of copper ore annually. The project, the government is hoping, will spark the reanimation of some $50 billion worth of mining investments that stalled during the pandemic.

Peru’s attraction to the transnational mining companies is founded upon the lower costs of extracting copper and other minerals from the country’s soil, in particular compared to neighboring Chile.

This is in turn based upon significantly lower wages for Peruvian miners and other workers in a country where successive “free market” reforms and “structural adjustment programs,” initiated under the right-wing dictatorship of former President Alberto Fujimori in the 1990s, decimated labor conditions and social programs. This includes the gutting of the public health sector, creating the conditions for the mass death of the ongoing pandemic.

The Castillo government, the illusions promoted by pseudo-left elements notwithstanding, is continuing to enforce these conditions.

The resistance of the Quellaveco mineworkers to the mass COVID infections promoted by Anglo-American and abetted by the Castillo government is part of the growing movement of the working class internationally against the policy of the bourgeoisie in every country to subordinate the defense of human life to profit interests.

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