

# Peru's government responds to transport strikes with police state threats

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Transport workers in the Peruvian capital of Lima and the neighboring port city of Callao carried out their seventh and most extensive strike on April 10, involving an estimated 20,000 drivers and 700 transport companies. The strike, like the previous ones over the past year, was staged as a protest against the violent extortionist gangs that have claimed the lives of numerous transport workers and terrorized working class neighborhoods, with over 500 deaths attributed to assassinations so far this year.

The strike received overwhelming support from the population, which is increasingly hostile to the political setup in a country deemed by the World Bank as the fourth most unequal in the world, with seven out of ten inhabitants living in poverty or “at risk of falling into poverty.”

A constant throughout the seven transport strikes has been the disparity between the demands of the transport organizations' leaders, centered on the call for increased police enforcement against the extortionist mafias, and the broader public, which is calling for the resignation of Peru's unelected President Dina Boluarte and the corrupt Congress under the slogan, “Throw them all out.”

Initially expected to last three days, the April 10 walkout was limited to just 24 hours by the strike leaders. The strike's suspension, announced by Martín Valeriano, president of Anitra, the main organizer of the strike, followed meetings between public transport leaders and members of Congress, which resulted in an agreement to bolster the presence of the Peruvian National Police (PNP) and the Armed Forces.

Public transport leaders, representing the owners of small private companies, are aligned with corrupt legislators in Congress and are concerned with restoring law and order on the streets so that they can assure their profits, while workers fear for their lives at the hands of gunmen demanding protection payoffs.

Social media captured the unfolding April 10 strike in Lima's North Cone, composed of densely populated districts of workers and immigrants from the countryside. Live videos revealed that no buses were operational, with only illegal *combis* and *micros* – minivans – picking up

passengers, charging twice or three times the usual rates.

Starting early in the morning, a caravan of buses from “Los Chinos”, a company frequently targeted with extortion, joined the transport workers' march. The “Chinos” buses provided transportation for protesters heading to the meeting point of Acho in the Rimac district, from where they would proceed on foot crossing the Balta bridge on their way to Congress.

The strike was marked by clashes between the National Police and protesters. In various parts of the city, the police used tear gas to disperse the crowds, which led to the closure of several businesses. Protesters threw rocks, and the police responded with pepper spray, leading to multiple arrests. Transport workers in Puente Piedra, in Lima's North Cone, were confronted by the police while attempting to block vehicles that were not participating in the strike.

Universities and schools announced a shift to virtual teaching, but this did not deter a group of students from the National University of San Marcos (UNMSM) from participating in the protests. They joined tens of thousands of others who marched from various working-class districts toward the Congress in downtown Lima. One student was injured by pellets fired by the police as the march approached the Congress.

The widow of Loymer Benigno, a driver murdered by hitmen the day before the strike, marched holding a banner with her husband's portrait, telling the media that he was a devoted father who worked tirelessly for his children.

The crowd marching along the Panamericana Norte highway towards Congress was stopped by a contingent of riot police, which prevented them from occupying all three lanes of the road. As the protesters reached Abancay Avenue, police repression intensified, and tear gas was used extensively, resulting in injuries among protesters and causing local merchants to flee.

Despite efforts by the strike leaders to limit demands to pressuring Congress to strengthen the police apparatus, demands for political change persisted on April 10. A 76-year-old passerby, interviewed by Radio Programas del

Perú (RPP), said: “The only people responsible are Dina Boluarte and the Ministry of the Interior. She flaunts her Rolex watches. The ministers have their security. They protect themselves while the people starve.”

Magda Cortés told RPP: “Crime is chronic in El Callao. Yesterday, in retaliation, two people were killed. It's very sad. This stems from poor government policies. The political class protects itself while the extortionists continue to operate.”

Government officials and Peru's ruling financial oligarchy are well aware of the mounting anger in the working class as Boluarte's popularity rate remains in the single digits, with that of the Congress just as low. The increase in repressive measures ostensibly directed against crime organizations that enjoy both police and political protection are aimed at preparing for upcoming conflicts involving the working class, peasants, youth, and millions of poor families in Peru.

In addition to the approval by the Peruvian Congress of a “180-day state of emergency” and the buildup of the National Police (PNP), President Boluarte recently approved a law introduced by Renovación Popular, the far-right party led by multimillionaire Opus Dei member and current Lima Mayor Rafael López Aliaga, that, according to a front-page headline in *La República*, “Authorizes the PNP to Kill with Impunity.”

Also, on the day of the strike, Boluarte appeared live on television from what she called her “War Room,” a name she assigned to the Cáceres Room in the Government Palace. This ostentatious title may be meant to evoke the White House Situation Room, from which former President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton oversaw the assassination of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011. It explicitly indicates that she views her government as engaged in an armed conflict.

But, who is the enemy? After she assumed the presidency in December 2022 she imposed a “shoot to kill” policy against protesters, and all indications are her war continues to be directed against the impoverished majority of Peruvians.

*La República* explains that the new measures “go against a principle of due process” and “reveal something bigger: the fear of the members of the ruling alliance of an almost entirely fed-up citizenry.” There is a growing fear that the mounting social crisis will spark a revolt by the working class, which has yet to play a central role in the protests.

As her government turns towards increased repression, Boluarte appears poised to follow the examples of the right-wing authoritarian regimes of Argentina's Javier Milei, Ecuador's Daniel Noboa and El Salvador's Nayib Bukele in forging a close and subservient relationship with Trump and US imperialism. During the February meeting of the World

Economic Forum in Davos, Boluarte went so far as to extend an open invitation to Trump, suggesting he visit Peru, or that failing, she be given an audience at the White House or at his Mar-a-Lago mansion.

However, Boluarte faces a major challenge. Forty percent of Peru's exports go to China, compared to only 15 percent for the United States. Additionally, China far surpasses the US in direct investment in Peru, having invested \$38.8 billion compared to just \$6.6 billion from the US.

The Chancay mega-port, developed and managed by the Chinese multinational Cosco, is set to become the central hub for South American goods shipped to Asia, reducing transportation times and costs for exports from Peru, Ecuador, Chile, and Bolivia. It is designed to serve as the final point in an interoceanic highway or railway linking São Paulo, the largest and most economically important city in South America, to the Pacific.

Without a doubt, the Trump administration views China's involvement in Chancay with the same militaristic hostility it unleashed against Panama over Chinese companies operating port facilities on the Panama Canal.

Meanwhile, the Peruvian regime has aped the right-wing anti-immigrant campaign waged by Trump, with the government and the media promoting the narrative that street crime is attributable to the influx of approximately 1.5 million Venezuelans immigrants.

During an interview on the April 10 strike, Gen. Oscar Manuel Arriola, the chief the National Police, was asked by a journalist why the PNP's “many announcements” had not been accompanied by any apparent action. Visibly angered, Arriola responded: “Today, we expelled 40 Venezuelans for posing a risk. We are prioritizing safety by highlighting these dangers.”

Arriola went on to proudly recall that the Armed Forces had defeated the guerrilla groups Shining Path and MRTA, capturing and imprisoning their leaders. Peru remains deeply scarred by this protracted internal war. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) created in its aftermath recorded 23,969 cases of deaths and “disappearances”, with the real toll believed to be more than twice as high. This was accompanied by widespread torture and the unjust imprisonment of tens of thousands.



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