

Crisis in Peru and the lessons of the 1977 general strike

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Within a month of taking office, Peru's new president, Keiko Fujimori, is facing growing unrest, including strikes, highway blockades and confrontations with police, from the Amazon region of Ucayali to the indigenous communities of the southern Andes.

Fujimori's electoral promises have already proven empty. Deploying soldiers in working-class districts has not stopped hitmen from murdering public transit drivers and small business owners. More than 70 percent of firearm killings in urban areas are linked to extortion or gang disputes.

This failure provided the pretext for declaring a state of emergency in Lima and its seaport Callao and deploying the Armed Forces, not to combat street crime, but to intimidate mounting popular opposition.

The working class cannot rely on the established organizations to lead a struggle against the new rightist regime; it must draw lessons from its own history, particularly from the general strike of July 19, 1977. In that struggle it was the rank and file workers that overflowed the channels of the existing trade unions and became the indispensable driving force against the dictatorship of Gen. Francisco Morales Bermúdez. Ordinary workers—not the Stalinist CGTP leadership, which remained loyal to the “Revolutionary Military Government”—were the decisive force.

The Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces (1968–1980)

The actions of the Peruvian Armed Forces must be understood within the international crisis of the period. Gen. Juan Velasco Alvarado's October 1968 coup formed part of a wave of bourgeois-nationalist regimes that used nationalizations and anti-imperialist rhetoric to contain working-class revolution. These included Peronism in Argentina and Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government in Chile.

General Morales Bermúdez took power in an August 1975 military coup against Velasco, with Washington's backing. This regime reversed Velasco's limited nationalist reforms. Workers confronted a state of emergency, permanent curfews and attacks on labor rights, including the right to strike, job security, and protections against mass layoffs.

The coup took place as Velasco became increasingly unable to prevent the radicalization of the organizations it sought to bring under the wing of the state, including his fraudulent “non-communist, non-capitalist society” through the National Social Mobilization Support System or SINAMOS, which sought to connect the military government to a popular base. Velasco had also leaned on the Revolutionary Labor Movement (MLR), a corporatist strikebreaking apparatus with fascistic characteristics. Both were dissolved rapidly by Morales Bermúdez.

Repression had begun under Velasco, whose regime sought to replace independent unions with a military-controlled confederation while tolerating the Peruvian General Confederation of Workers (CGTP) because its Stalinist leadership supported the “Armed Forces Revolution.”

Other organizations like Vanguardia Revolucionaria and SUTEP, by contrast, faced repression.

Mobilizations of June and early July

As the economic crisis deepened due to the ongoing low copper and sugar prices, the crash of the fishing industry and other economic shocks amid IMF austerity diktats to secure emergency loans, Finance Minister Luis Barúa resigned on May 17, 1977, and was replaced by Walter Piazza. On June 10, Piazza announced an Emergency Plan imposing drastic spending cuts, sharp fuel price increases, reduced state imports, currency devaluations, and food price increases of up to 30 percent due to subsidy cuts. Wage increases were capped at 15 percent.

The announcement was the last straw. Strikes and violent confrontations with the National Police spread across the country.

On June 13, the Bank Workers' Federation (FEB), led by the Stalinist PCP (Unidad), organized a token 90-minute strike. Student protests simultaneously erupted throughout Lima. Students from San Marcos, UNI, and Cayetano Heredia blocked Venezuela and Túpac Amaru avenues, major arteries connecting working-class districts to Lima's industrial corridor between Venezuela, Argentina and Colonial avenues and extending toward Callao. Police responded with gunfire and tear gas, arresting approximately 100 people.

The regime retaliated with raids on union offices, arresting leaders and activists. It fabricated communiqués claiming popular support for government measures.

Beginning on June 15, Cuzco, Puno and Arequipa erupted in mass mobilizations, strikes and confrontations with police, prompting the regime to impose curfews throughout the southern Andes.

In Cuzco, students blocked streets with stones and fought police around the Plaza de Armas. On June 16, a 72-hour strike called by the Broad Front, led by the CGTP-affiliated Cuzco Workers' Federation, spread through nearly the entire region.

In Puno, university demonstrations prompted the army to occupy the city.

In Arequipa, police crushed school protests on June 21. The following day, a 48-hour general strike began, called by the FDTA union federation, controlled by the Stalinist PCP (Unidad). In his book *Social Movements and Military Dictatorship: The Political Experience of the National Strike of July 19, 1977*, historian Manuel Valladares describes the result:

The strike was near-total: bank workers, factories, and shops shut down; rail service halted; transport to Puno and Cusco paralyzed — virtually the entire Peruvian south ground to a

standstill.

The central Andes

In Ayacucho, more than 100 professors and university students were detained and a province-wide curfew imposed. The arrests targeted the same region where a student-popular movement had risen in 1969, confronting Velasco's SINAMOS and its intelligence apparatus.

In the mining centers, a pro-government gang violently seized the Cerro de Pasco Miners' and Metalworkers' Union hall. Cornelio Rivera Trinidad, general secretary of the Federation of Miners and Metalworkers of the Center, had been imprisoned since June 4 on fabricated charges of "labor agitation and sabotage."

Demanding Rivera's immediate release, five Southern Peru Copper Corporation unions representing 6,000 workers called a general strike beginning June 25. It lasted more than a week. In Moquegua, schools were suspended following student demonstrations.

Valladares explains:

Within the first 20 days after Economy Minister Piazza Tanguis's address, events unfolded rapidly. Growing public discontent over economic measures and government policy spread across mining centers and cities, especially provincial capitals. Across two-thirds of the country, particularly the central and southern regions, protests and resistance intensified, while the government responded mainly with police repression and curfews.

Conflicts between Moscow-aligned Stalinists (Unidad) and the Maoists

The Peruvian Communist Party (Unidad) was divided between a faction advocating continued "critical support" for the military government and another demanding a complete break. This debate unfolded as calls for a national strike spread among workers and party members, while *Unidad*, the party newspaper, remained silent on the strike call.

The Maoist PCP (Patria Roja) supported a national strike but insisted that it be organized independently of, or even against, the CGTP, whose PCP (Unidad) leadership it regarded as opportunist.

On July 5, the Unitary Union of Workers in Education of Peru, or SUTEP, organized a strike involving 120,000 teachers, observed almost unanimously nationwide. Secondary students demonstrated in several areas.

The movement then spread northward. In Trujillo, residents of impoverished neighborhoods protested transportation fare increases of more than 50 percent and clashed with police. In Huancayo on July 11–12, violence left at least five dead, 36 injured, and hundreds arrested, prompting a 13-hour curfew and army occupation.

On July 14, 23 unions representing nearly the entire organized labor movement issued nine demands covering wages, prices, job security, democratic freedoms, and cancellation of agrarian debt. The Comando Unitario de Lucha (CUL) was formed bringing together the leaderships of the unions and federations.

On July 19, the feared "Red Tuesday" had arrived. Valladares' account summarized these events:

By 8 or 9 a.m., Lima's public transportation had stopped. Massive concentrations of workers and poor residents surrounded the city. Túpac Amaru Avenue, the Northern Pan American Highway, Callao-Ventanilla Highway, Central Highway, Pachacútec Avenue, and the industrial arteries of Argentina, Colonial, and Venezuela avenues were repeatedly blocked.

The blockades prevented workers from reaching central Lima, while others joined strike pickets near major industrial areas. Fierce clashes erupted in Cárcamo. Army tanks blocked mass marches toward downtown Lima and Plaza Dos de Mayo, while Marines patrolled Callao.

Around noon, Marines traveling in a military bus opened fire on residents of Comas on Túpac Amaru Avenue, killing five. Another resident was killed under similar circumstances in Vitarte.

The strike was equally decisive throughout Peru. Major cities on the coast, in the highlands, and in the jungle came to a standstill. Universities, teachers, bank employees, and residents of poor settlements played important roles.

The strike also swept mining centers across northern, central, and southern Peru. Except for Centromin, most major and medium-sized mining operations joined the stoppage. In some regions, miners coordinated their actions with sections of the peasantry.

The July 19 strike has enormous relevance for today. In *Sociedad y Política*, historian Aníbal Quijano identified two decisive facets of the movement: First, the industrial working class led the general strike, and second, the movement advanced from trade-union demands toward broader political demands. Rank-and-file workers demonstrated that a ruthless CIA-backed military dictatorship could be defeated. Despite repression and the subsequent dismissal of more than 5,000 grassroots leaders, the mobilization compelled the regime to announce a transition to civilian rule and elections for a 1978 Constituent Assembly.

The Constituent Assembly is treated by Valladares, and by the academic literature generally, as the great achievement of the strike. It was in fact the instrument for its containment. A movement that had brought a US-backed dictatorship to its knees was channeled back into the parliamentary framework the dictatorship itself had convoked.

In sum, the July 1977 strike shattered the military government's political authority and intensified fears of a revolutionary explosion. Following negotiations with the bourgeois parties—APRA, Acción Popular (AP), and the Partido Popular Cristiano (PPC)—that had begun before July 19, Morales Bermúdez announced elections for a Constituent Assembly and presidential elections for 1980.

The growing militancy of rank-and-file workers had forced the Stalinist leaderships to establish the CUL, enabling the strike to be organized through the machinery of the principal union confederations and left-wing parties. After July 19, however, the CUL demobilized the movement, giving the military the opportunity to persecute and fire rank-and-file leaders.

It is important to distinguish between the rank-and-file cadres of the PCP (Unidad) and its corrupt Stalinist leadership, which subordinated itself to the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy. Throughout the 1970s, this bureaucracy had maneuvered to develop commercial and political ties with capitalist governments throughout Latin America, including fascist-military dictatorships, utilizing the region's Communist Parties and affiliated trade union confederations like the CGTP to further its aims.

Rank-and-file PCP (Unidad) members, however, courageously participated from the beginning in the spontaneous mobilizations of workers, peasants, and university students against the package imposed by Economy Minister Walter Piazza—an attempt to make the oppressed pay for the capitalist crisis.

from any struggle to construct a revolutionary party and used to lend these tendencies a left facade.

Hugo Blanco's speech and what it left out

Late in 1977, the Worker, Peasant, Student and Popular Front (FOCEP) was created as an unprincipled electoral coalition of left tendencies for the Constituent Assembly elections, with Hugo Blanco as its leading candidate.

Blanco's political tradition was that of Nahuel Moreno, the Argentine revisionist who had recruited him as a student in the late 1950s. While formally belonging to the ICFI, Moreno had by the mid-1950s turned his group into an appendage of the bourgeois nationalist movement of Juan Domingo Perón. Through the Latin American Secretariat of Orthodox Trotskyism (SLATO), he directed his Peruvian followers, Blanco among them, to treat the peasantry as the vanguard of the revolution and to prepare an insurrection modeled on Castro's guerrilla movement in Cuba. No systematic work was carried out by these forces in Peru's fast-growing working class. Moreno stated the underlying conception plainly in a letter to his Peruvian co-thinkers in March 1963: the postwar revolutions had shown, he claimed, that Marxist revolutionary parties were not necessary for the victory of revolutions. This marked a direct repudiation of the revolutionary role of the working class, and of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. In 1963, Moreno followed the American SWP into the Pabloite United Secretariat.

This was the tradition Blanco brought to the Constituent Assembly. Having spent two decades orienting away from the working class, he now worked alongside Stalinist, Maoist and Castroite tendencies to divert the upsurge that the July 1977 strike had unleashed.

Following the July 1977 general strike, the military provided television airtime to candidates for the Constituent Assembly. Blanco delivered what appeared to the masses as a powerful speech based on demands drawn from the Fourth International's "Transitional Program."

Blanco denounced the government and capitalism, demanded nationalization of the banks and industry, redistribution of land and workers control over production. He proposed that leaders elected by grassroots organizations could be removed by popular vote, called for socialist unity among the oppressed peoples of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, and concluded: "Workers to Power!"

Blanco received 433,413 votes, or 12.34 percent, placing third behind APRA and the PPC. The Communist Party (Unidad), despite being the largest organized party among workers and the oppressed, received 207,612 votes (5.91 percent). FOCEP, the PCP (Unidad), and the Frente Nacional de Trabajadores y Campesinos received a combined total of 776,577 votes, or 22.11 percent—more than one in five valid votes, and five percentage points more than Fujimori received in the first round of the presidential election in April 2006.

Despite the brutal persecution and mass firings in the wake of the general strike, these results expressed, albeit in distorted form, the continued political radicalization of the Peruvian working class.

Blanco's speech stripped the transitional demands of the purpose for which Trotsky wrote them. The "Transitional Program" opens by locating the whole crisis of the epoch in a single problem: the historical crisis of mankind, Trotsky wrote, is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership. The transitional demands were elaborated to lead workers from their present consciousness, still reformist and spontaneous, to the conclusion that power must be taken, and to build the party capable of leading it.

Blanco used them for the opposite purpose. Delivered as an electoral appeal from a coalition that included the very tendencies blocking the working class from political independence, the demands were severed

The dead end of Vanguardia Revolucionaria

Vanguardia Revolucionaria was founded in 1965, in the wake of the Cuban Revolution and the defeat of the guerrilla movements that it inspired across the continent. Its founders came from three directions: dissidents from the Stalinist Communist Party, radicalized elements from the nationalist APRA and the MIR, and a layer of students and intellectuals drawn to Castroism.

In place of the working class, the VR looked to the peasantry, and for a period, to armed struggle. It built a substantial base in the Confederación Campesina del Perú and among teachers, and in the 1970s turned toward union work as the industrial working class grew.

The July 1977 general strike accelerated the fragmentation of Vanguardia Revolucionaria (VR). In 1978, VR helped establish the Unidad Democrática Popular (UDP), which later joined another broad leftist coalition, Izquierda Unida (IU).

Patria Roja boycotted the 1978 Constituent Assembly elections, denouncing them as a maneuver to contain popular opposition. In 1980, it reversed course and helped form UNIR, a coalition of Maoist and bourgeois-nationalist organizations that subsequently joined the IU.

Formed in 1980 from numerous fragmented left-wing organizations, the IU marked the political degeneration of the old Peruvian left. It reached its high point with the election of Alfonso Barrantes as mayor of Lima. Its failure paved the way for APRA's Alan García, elected president in 1985. García's import-substitution policies ended catastrophically, with hyperinflation reaching some 7,600 percent in 1990. He was succeeded by Alberto Fujimori, the father of the current president, who consolidated a right-wing dictatorial regime.

Hugo Blanco would run an electoral operation throughout the 1980s outside of the IU until his party liquidated into the bourgeois Partido Unificado Mariateguista, under which Blanco would win a Senate seat on the Izquierda Unida list. His term was cut short by Fujimori's April 1992 self-coup and threats against his life. He was granted asylum in Mexico.

Political repression and the 1993 Constitution

By the time Alberto Fujimori took office, and following the dissolution of the USSR, the IMF—proclaiming the triumph of capitalism over Stalinist "communism"—demanded free-market programs throughout Latin America. With the backing of the Armed Forces, on April 5, 1992, Fujimori dissolved Congress and began ruling as a dictator.

The 1993 Constitution, drafted by a kangaroo Constituent Congress and ratified in a referendum on October 31, 1993, was designed to favor foreign investment. Transnational corporations could extract mineral ore and process it abroad, where much of the profit is realized. Capital-intensive machinery produced massive layoffs in mining and other industries, while Fujimori's legislation dismantled job security and labor rights won through decades of struggle.

While the CGTP, Peru's main union confederation, issued militant statements and demagogic calls for general strikes as purchasing power collapsed, the country erupted in protests. Street demonstrations confronted police repression, while looting swept Lima's working-class

districts and the provinces amid fears of hunger. The government deployed the Army and declared a state of emergency.

The Stalinist CGTP leadership betrayed the workers, as it had during the July 1977 strike, by mounting no serious mobilization against the 1991 labor decrees and the April 1992 self-coup, nor even against the assassination of its own general secretary, Pedro Huilca, in December 1992 by an Army death squad. Its capitulation allowed labor reforms to severely undermine the unions' capacity to resist. With the working class politically neutralized and the Armed Forces behind him, Fujimori consolidated his dictatorship. Both the Stalinist CGTP and Maoist SUTEP leaderships capitulated before his anti-worker, pro-foreign-investment program, resulting in the devastating destruction of the unions and mass unemployment.

Unionization fell from 35–40 percent in the 1970s and 1980s—reaching as high as 80 percent in some factories—to just 6.2 percent in the formal private sector by 2000. Millions of workers lost their jobs as capital-intensive corporations expanded, giving rise to massive labor-market informality. Micro and small enterprises (MYPES) and small and medium enterprises (PYMES) became capitalist mechanisms for dispersing the working class, with most surviving less than two years before going bankrupt.

Peru's growth during the 2002–2014 commodity boom resulted not from sound economic policy but from favorable conditions on the world market. Once the boom ended, poverty bounced back. Defenders of the 1993 Constitution obscure this reality by invoking the supposed “economic miracle” of the commodities boom.

The Constitution was never a framework for national development. It was an instrument of class warfare, concentrating wealth in a narrow oligarchy while condemning most Peruvians to permanent economic insecurity.

By some measures, Peru has become the most unequal country in Latin America, itself the most socially polarized region on the planet. The richest 0.1 takes in a whopping 22 percent of the country's income, the largest share for that wealthiest layer of any country. Meanwhile, the poorest 10 percent—approximately 3.4 million Peruvians—earn just 500 soles (US\$149) monthly, equal to only 48 percent of the food basket for a family of four. Forty percent earn the official minimum wage or less, while 60 percent live on less than the total family basket required for essential food, goods, and services.

This concentration of wealth is precisely what the 1993 Constitution was intended to protect.

The 1993 Constitution also opened Peru to foreign direct investment (FDI), which in the intervening years has come particularly from China and other South American countries. China's investments now stand at \$30 billion–\$38 billion, compared to just \$6.67 billion for the US.

The far right's enthusiasm over Keiko Fujimori's victory and affinity for US imperialist policy in the region is in line with a turn by ruling class layers throughout the continent, from Argentina under Javier Milei, to Chile under José Antonio Kast, Colombia under De la Espriella and Bolivia under Rodrigo Paz. US imperialism and these regimes are currently conspiring to install Flavio Bolsonaro, the son of the former far-right president who is currently serving a prison sentence for his abortive coup attempt in Brazil.

In every one of these countries, however, the new right-wing regimes lack any popular constituency, and their policies, designed to benefit only the native oligarchies and foreign capital, are provoking mass hostility. Meanwhile, their alignment with Washington and its drive to reassert US imperialist hegemony by driving out Chinese influence, flies in the face of economic development and can only provoke deeper crises and international conflict. Nowhere is this more true than in Peru.

Conclusion

Having written off the revolutionary potential of the working class—in Peru, where the peasantry was assigned the vanguard role, and above all in the advanced capitalist countries, where revolution was declared off the historical agenda—Morenoism and the other Pabloite variants sought substitutes in existing leaderships. Adaptation to the Stalinist apparatus, the Castroite guerrillas, the bourgeois nationalist movements, and the peasant unions went hand in hand with the repudiation of the theory of permanent revolution, the international struggle for socialism and the building of a revolutionary party in the working class.

The question of a revolutionary program to unite the working class across the Americas is more important than ever. As far-right regimes across the hemisphere join forces through the “Shield of the Americas,” preparing to use the Latin American and US masses as cannon fodder in a war against China, the answer is the construction of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout the continent and beyond.



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