Pope Leo XIV's South American tour: The Vatican rushes to the aid of discredited regimes

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Pope Leo XIV landed outside Lima on Wednesday afternoon, with President Keiko Fujimori waiting for him on the tarmac. Peru is the final stop of a 12-day tour that has taken the American-Peruvian pontiff through Uruguay and Argentina and will end in Chiclayo, the diocese he governed until 2023.

Coming a week after the repudiation of Trump in the US midterm elections, two weeks after the defeat of Flávio Bolsonaro in Brazil, and days after Santiago Peña became the first head of state of Washington's Shield of the Americas to be driven from office by mass protest, the tour has the character of a crisis intervention.

The Vatican has stepped into this volatile situation to play the role it first adopted with Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* encyclical in 1891: to voice sympathy for the suffering of the masses while steering the emerging upsurge of workers' struggles back under the domination of the capitalist state, the employers and the union bureaucracy.

The tour opened in Uruguay on November 6. Before President Yamandú Orsi of the Broad Front (Frente Amplio) at Montevideo's Plaza Independencia, the Pope declared that "the value of persons cannot be measured by what they produce." The next day, in the working-class district of Casavalle, he lamented that children go hungry in "a country as rich in resources as this." Official figures put poverty among children under six at 32.2 percent in 2024.

The PIT-CNT union federation, politically tied to the Broad Front, has staged repeated general strikes against the Orsi government's budget, and Economy Minister Gabriel Oddone has rejected its demand for a tax on the richest 1 percent: "not in this term of government."

In Buenos Aires, before some 1,000 officials, bishops and diplomats at the Palacio Libertad on November 8, with President Javier Milei in attendance, the Pope declared that "the economy must serve the person, not the person the economy," and that "democracy is also a part of Argentina's heritage that needs to be safeguarded."

The next day, at the Catholic University (UCA), he addressed the leaders of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), Human Capital Minister Sandra Pettovello and a who's who of Argentine capital, from the Businessmen's Association (AEA) to the owners of *Clarín* and *La Nación*. "Where the domination of a few is the law, work becomes exploitation," he told them.

Contracts awarded directly by Karina Milei's office, several to a single bidder, put the cost to the treasury of the November 9 Mass in Palermo at about US$13 million. Techint, Santander and other corporations added US$3 million.

In Lima, the Pope urged Fujimori and the authorities to "cultivate honesty, rectitude and a disposition to encounter," and said that for families "peace has a very concrete meaning: going out to work without fear." The day before, transport workers called a march on Congress against extortion rackets that carried out 167 attacks on Lima's buses in the first half of the year. Cargo truckers will strike for 72 hours from November 16 against rising diesel prices, while the Pope is still in the country.

A coalition in crisis

The governments that received the Pope, as well as those of neighboring countries, are all deeply unpopular, and all are preparing even more regressive measures. Orsi's approval in Uruguay stood at 24 percent in October, according to Cifra. Fujimori's approval fell from 57 percent to 37 percent within weeks of taking office. Milei's approval also stood at 37 percent in October.

In Chile, 64 percent disapprove of fascistic José Antonio Kast, whose 2027 budget suspends school meals for 1.6 million children. In Bolivia, right-wing President Rodrigo Paz saw his approval fall from 64 percent to 25 percent after eliminating the diesel subsidy and imposing a state of exception amid 53 days of strikes and blockades.

Except for the Orsi administration, all these regimes joined the Shield of the Americas, a fascistic alliance formed by Trump in March and placed under a Pentagon command in August. Any pretense that these regimes ride a popular wave has been stripped away, especially after the US midterms, with Trump's approval rating now standing at just 32 percent.

The CGT waits for the Pope

In Argentina, the union bureaucracy was openly waiting for the Pope. Milei's Labor Modernization Law, which cheapens dismissals and attacks collective agreements, took effect on March 6. The CGT's last general strike was on February 19, the day the Chamber of Deputies debated the bill. Some 300,000 formal jobs have been lost under Milei.

On September 29 the CGT leadership ruled out a new strike. "By

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striking, we harm those we represent," CGT co-leader Cristian Jerónimo explained. The leadership, the press reported, was counting on the papal visit to change the climate. The day after the UCA speech, the CGT praised the Pope and asked the government for a "tripartite" dialogue on wages and employment. The AEA called for "unity and dialogue."

The Pope gave each side what it needed. "The union is an indispensable institution when it defends those who have no voice," he said, and added: "Businessmen, creators of jobs with their capital, so often risk their own wealth."

The framing recalls Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*. Written as the socialist movement spread across Europe, the encyclical defended private property as a natural right and promoted Catholic workers' associations to split the working class. Prevost explained in May 2025 that he chose his name because his predecessor had answered the "social question" of the first industrial revolution. Today's challenge remains the same: how to stop the working class from drawing revolutionary conclusions.

"Safeguard democracy"

The press made much of the friction with Milei, who once called the Argentine Pope Francis "the representative of the Evil One on Earth," and who skipped the Masses in Córdoba and Luján. The differences are over method. Leo XIV speaks for a section of the ruling class concerned that the policies and open fascist rhetoric of Trump and imitators such as Milei are provoking a social explosion. His appeal to "safeguard democracy" echoes the line of the Democratic Party after the midterms. In Argentina, the beneficiary is Peronism. Buenos Aires Governor Axel Kicillof, a Peronist presidential hopeful, gathered officials at Luján to declare that "we cannot get used to injustice."

As of this writing, none of his addresses to the authorities of the three countries has mentioned the US occupation of Venezuela, the bombing of fishing boats in the Caribbean and the Pacific, or the Shield of the Americas. In Lima he told Fujimori that "the events of the past deserve to be treated with justice and sensitivity." Fujimori is the political heir of her father's dictatorship. Her party, Fuerza Popular, pushed through a 2025 amnesty for soldiers and police accused of crimes during the internal war of 1980-2000.

As bishop in 2017, Prevost had said Alberto Fujimori should personally ask forgiveness. On Wednesday, he chose cautious words that no one in the hall could object to.

Lessons in crisis management

The Church brings to this task its own experience in surviving a crisis of legitimacy. Since the Boston *Globe* exposed the systematic rape of children by priests and its cover-up by the hierarchy in 2002, investigations from Dublin to Pennsylvania, where a 2018 grand jury found more than 300 priests had abused over 1,000 children, exposed a global pattern protected from the top. The scandal contributed to Benedict XVI's resignation in 2013.

Pope Francis, whose own record under the Argentine fascist dictatorship of 1976-1983 was never accounted for, was promoted as the humble reformer. In Chile in 2018 he called the accusations against Bishop Juan Barros "slander"; months later, amid mass outrage, every Chilean bishop offered his resignation.

Peru is a particularly significant test case. The Sodalicio de Vida Cristiana, a far-right society tied to Lima's elite, abused young members for decades, harassed the journalists who exposed it and was linked to land grabs against peasant communities in Piura. Victims credit Prevost, as bishop and later in Rome, with backing an investigation into the society's actions. Its founder was expelled in 2024, and the society was suppressed in April 2025. In May 2026 cardinals and bishops knelt before peasants in Catacaos. "We should have come 20 years ago; today we ask forgiveness," said the Vatican envoy, Jordi Bertomeu.

These measures were damage control, designed to preserve the institution. Thirty-three Sodalicio survivors had to write to the Vatican on October 26 complaining that no meeting with victims was planned. The Vatican announced one the next day. In Chiclayo, three sisters reported to Prevost in 2022 that two priests had abused them as children. The case, closed in Rome in 2023, was later taken up by a canon lawyer, since defrocked, with ties to the Sodalicio's defenders. But recordings published in December 2025 show a Vatican official calling Prevost's preliminary investigation "very poorly conducted." The complainants say one accused priest was allowed to leave the priesthood without trial. "It is incomprehensible that instead of seeking the truth and repairing the victims, the decision was made to close the case through a papal grace," said Ana María Quispe, one of the sisters.

Listening sessions, public penance and the sacrifice of the most compromised figures, all to preserve the institution: this is the method the Pope now offers to the region's rulers.

The Church's record

The Argentine Church blessed the US-backed 1976 coup that installed the Videla junta, and its chaplains ministered to the torturers. Father Christian von Wernich, a police chaplain, was sentenced to life in 2007 for murders, kidnappings and torture. John Paul II arrived on June 11, 1982, days before the junta's surrender in the Malvinas war, to preach reconciliation rather than condemn state terror.

Leo XIV's tour belongs to that tradition. As workers drive out a president in Paraguay and launch strikes and blockades in Bolivia and Peru, the Vatican preaches patience and "dialogue" with the class exploiting them. The ruling elites of Latin America, tied to foreign capital and dependent on Washington, have no answer to the crisis but austerity, states of exception and submission to US imperialism.

The working class can resolve it only by uniting its struggles across borders, independently of every faction of the bourgeoisie, on the revolutionary program of scientific socialism.

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