

Mass action in Peru threatens to topple president

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In the last couple of weeks, Peru has been hit by a near general strike across the country against the policies of the ruling government of centre-left President Alan Garcia. In the southern region of Puno, thousands strong demonstrations stormed the airport and train station. In Arequipa, nine police officers were taken hostage by protesters who demanded an exchange for the arrested. John Bowden reports.

In Lima, thirty thousand demonstrated and roads were blocked by many more in major cities across the country. The opposition candidate in last year's elections, the radical populist Ollanta Humala, joined the protests.

It began with a 15 day strike by 160,000 teachers against a new law that would force them to take regular compulsory assessment exams and other measures they believe are the first steps towards privatising the school system. The government has now agreed to negotiations with their union SUTEP, though militant teachers have denounced the suspension of the strike as a sell-out.

The outbreak of the strike on July 5 was the catalyst for the eruption of wider discontent, as construction workers, miners and the agrarian poor, joined mass protests in the cities, which the BBC reported 'paralysed the country'. Add to this, the two day general strike called by the Campesino Confederation of Peru (CCP), and the scale of the current crisis becomes clear. The strike had been brutally repressed with hundreds of social movement activists, including one hundred Peruvian trade union officials, being arrested by the state.

The CCP were mobilising against the 'free trade' agreement between the Peruvian government and the United States, which has yet to come in to force, but, when it does, will see compound problems of child labour, weak labour rights, and make it impossible for Peru's subsistence farmers to compete with cheap US multinationals.

But the protests go far beyond the free trade agreement or the demands of the teachers, but are a general uprising against the Garcia government.

Since the election of Garcia in June 2006, popular anger at the political system has intensified. Garcia had won by the election only by the narrowest of margins, beating off the challenge of Ollanta Humala, a radical populist, who claims to represent the indigenous Peruvian population - the impoverished and politically under-represented section of the country. Humala declared his support for and intention to follow the path of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Bolivia's Evo Morales.

Garcia was only able to win the election by appealing to the Peruvian rich and middle class, who united to side with him as a 'anyone but Humala' candidate, once the right wing candidate, the openly neoliberal Lourdes Flores, tumbled out in the first round with just 15% of the vote. Garcia demagogically promised to ensure that the poor would benefit from economic growth.

However illusions in Garcia have been short lived. The story of President Garcia is an interesting one. He

gained the presidency first in 1985 when he was just thirty-six years old. He attempted Keynesian-like social reforms at the time, used anti-imperialist rhetoric against the United States, nationalised the banks and insurance companies and capped foreign debt repayments to 10% of the gross national product (GNP).

This invoked the anger of the International Monetary Fund, Garcia's first presidency ended with a major economic crisis, as inflation spiralled. His government increasingly became more authoritarian and sought a military solution to the rising threat of the 'Shining Path' Maoist guerrilla movement - a 'solution' which resulted in several massacres of **campesinos** in the countryside and the alleged 'forced disappearances' of 1,600 people.

The Garcia presidency was recognised as a complete disaster by 1990 and led the way to the victory of a radical neo-liberal Alberto Fujimori, responsible for privatising many aspects of the Peruvian economy. His presidency turned into an elected dictatorship, attacking opposition in the country, dissolving the congress, purging the judiciary and suspending the constitution. Mired in corruption scandals he was forced to flee the country,

Thus, Garcia's return to power in 2006 with the backing of the United States is a quite remarkable change of fortunes. It was based upon the promise that he had 'learned from past mistakes' and he was committed to following a similar economic policy to Chile, the golden boy of the IMF and World Bank.

In the Andean and southern regions of Peru - Puno, Cuzco, Ayacucho and Arequipa - as well as in the rainforest areas in the north people voted overwhelmingly for Humala. Thus the political situation in Peru is extremely polarised between the workers and **campesinos** on the one hand and the right-wing, pro-US middle class.

The opposition to neo-liberalism in Peru has traditionally been concentrated in certain areas, particularly in mining and **campesino** areas. However, the recent national strikes all over Peru represent a degree of communication and organisation at a national level, demonstrating clearly that the workers and the urban and rural poor can unite to resist neoliberalism. The capital Lima has become the centre of the current mass resistance. The nationwide, radicalised teachers' union can obviously play a vital role in the process of communication linkage and the linkage of struggles.

Clearly, Peru, like so many other Latin American states in the last ten years, has entered another pre-revolutionary crisis. This is not unfamiliar in Peru either, as in 2003 it was also gripped by a mass general strike, which equally paralysed the country

This might seem strange to some given the fact that, according to government figures, the Peruvian economy experienced an eight-percent growth in 2006, the highest annual rise for eleven years. But as with other 'globalization booms' of recent years the bonanza is only for a minority, for the super-rich and the middle classes. At the same time the number of Peruvians living below the poverty level has reached nearly 50 per cent.

The repression against activists, and Garcia's track record of using violence to crush leftist opponents, is a warning of the potential dangers ahead.

The solution to the crisis in Peru is to build a revolutionary party out of the workers and other social movements that are erupting against Garcia and his neoliberal policies. Such a party, could fight not only against neoliberalism and imperialism, but also to bring an end to the whole capitalist system - expropriating the rich, putting the privileged upper middle class on rations. It would fight to address the crying needs of the urban and rural poor for decent housing, schools, hospitals, electricity and clean water.

It would urge the rural poor to take over the farms of the rich, etc. To carry out such a radical programme against the resistance of the Peruvian capitalists as well as imperialism means creating a state, based on councils of the workers, peasants and urban poor, by means of a revolutionary overthrow of the entire present order.

Garcia can be overthrown by a prolongation and intensification of the ongoing struggles, especially if the movement is won to an all out general strike aimed at the totality of his neoliberal policies, if action committees of recallable delegates take over the running of the strike, if mass self defence squads defend it against police repression, if serious attempts are made to win over the ranks and file soldiers to the people.

If Garcia's regime collapses in the near future then Humala would be the most likely beneficiary. Like other Latin American populists he will then be forced either into accommodation with US imperialism and the Peruvian bourgeoisie, or he will make some sort of limited break with them like Chavez or Morales. This could bring down the wrath of Bush on him, who has been forced to stand by as the dominos keep falling in the US's oldest 'back yard.' Then of course workers and peasants should support all the measures Humala might take against the US and its Peruvian agents. But rapidly the necessity would be posed of a break with capitalism as such.

However today the task remains the struggle against Garcia and if in the course of this the Peruvian workers and poor peasants build organs of struggle (councils) which can become organs of power than an outcome far more revolutionary than Humala is a real possibility.

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