

# Peruvian peasant leaders sentenced to 9 years in prison for participating in mining protests

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In a ruling that has sparked outrage within the Peruvian working class, 11 peasant leaders were sentenced to nine years in prison on July 25 for participating in marches against the Chinese-owned Las Bambas mega-mine in 2015.

In a parallel development, four young individuals from Cusco have been sentenced to six and seven years in prison for participating in protests against President Dina Boluarte in January 2023.

According to the website *Servindi*, which advocates for Peru's Indigenous peoples, the Cotabambas' Single Criminal Court in Apurímac sentenced the peasant leaders for

... crimes of aggravated damage, disturbances, and obstruction of the operation of public services. The sentence, ... [includes] civil reparation of 50,000 soles in favor of the State and US\$88,000 in favor of the mining company [Las Bambas].

In a previous statement, the *MUQUI* network, which covers communities affected by mining, wrote:

Following the protests carried out by the communities of Cotabambas due to the passage of hundreds of trucks with minerals from the mining company MMG Las Bambas in their territories ... in September 2015, three people died as a result of police repression, and more than 20 people were injured; the Prosecutor's Office accused 19 community members ... of illegal possession of weapons, causing common danger with catastrophic means, disturbances and damages.

When the sentence was issued, David Velasco, the defense attorney for the accused from the Ecumenical Foundation for

Development and Peace (Pedepaz), told the newspaper *La República*:

In essence, it is the criminalization of social protest and the use of criminal law to prevent people from defending their rights.

... They will use criminal law against those who publicly demonstrate against arbitrary decisions of the central or local government or against companies that violate rights to land, the environment, and others.

*La República* coverage of the verdict revealed that "the defense deemed it contradictory and arbitrary as the fundamental requirements, including the proof of an organized power apparatus, were not established in the judicial process."

According to defense attorney David Velasco, "None of that has been proven in the trial," emphasizing "the lack of clarification regarding the responsibility as media authors of the crimes charged rather than indirect arguments supporting participation."

The guilty verdict against the 11 peasant leaders is an assault on the right to protest the abuses of mining and capitalist companies. It is another step toward dictatorial measures by Boluarte to control a restive population.

Boluarte's presidency began with a brutal crackdown on those who opposed the removal of then-President Pedro Castillo due to the failed self-coup of December 7, 2022. Boluarte is facing allegations before the International Criminal Court in The Hague for ordering the police and the armed forces to use firearms and shoot to kill. These actions resulted in 49 deaths, 155 attempted murders and 937 injuries during the protests from December 2022 to February 2023.

The president's administration has an approval rating of only 6 percent, reflecting the growing public dissatisfaction

with her, which has led to numerous protests and marches by workers and young people during the national holidays on July 27, 28 and 29 in Lima and other parts of the country.

In the context of increased class struggles in Peru and elsewhere and the escalating competition between the United States and China for South American markets, the peasants' resistance against the Las Bambas mine is of great significance. The mine, owned by the Chinese company MMG, represents an investment of US\$10 billion, accounting for 11.1 percent of copper exports and 1 percent of the national GDP.

The mine's history is marked by conflicts between the mining company and the surrounding peasant communities, who own the land crossed by the road used for transporting copper to the port of Matarani for export.

Since its planning in 2004, there have been protests to prevent its opening due to interference with local communities. Las Bambas began operations in 2015, which led to an increase in clashes with miners and indigenous peoples in the region.

- In February 2015, the Challhuahuacho community members went on strike, demanding the hiring of local workers.

- On September 25, 2015, the area's residents began a second strike demanding the demolition of the treatment plant because they considered it polluting. The magnitude of the clashes between the community members and the mine led the government to declare a state of emergency in the provinces of Cotabambas, Grau, Andahuaylas, and Chincheros. The protests left four dead and 23 injured.

- In October 2016, the residents began a blockade due to the mining company's road use. The clashes left one community member dead, and 15 people and 20 police officers injured.

- On February 4, 2019, residents of the Nueva Fuerabamba community began a blockade of the road corridor.

- In December 2021, confrontations were reported at the security gate and its facilities. A new blockade of the southern corridor resulted in losses of US\$9.5 million a day in income.

- In January 2022, operations restarted. Other negotiations were also held with then-Prime Minister Mirtha Vásquez.

- In November 2023, residents of Challhuahuacho carried out a strike against the mining company by blockading roads at several strategic points, preventing the passage of vehicles and workers trying to enter the mining camp.

Las Bambas is only one of the most prominent among many conflicts between mining companies and Peruvian peasants. In its February report, the Ombudsman's Office reported that "socio-environmental conflicts linked to

mining activity rose from 84 to 78 cases this month, representing 37.9 percent of all social conflicts."

A new mega seaport located in Chancay, 80 kilometers north of Lima, is set to be inaugurated in November of this year. This development signifies the increasing rise of Chinese capital in terms of economic and political influence that had been held traditionally by the US in Latin America. Currently, 29.7 percent of Peruvian exports are destined for China, while the United States drastically dropped to second place, with just over half of that value, at 16.6 percent.

Peru is seen as an attractive market for foreign investors, with 51 projects in the mining, petroleum and energy sectors attracting an investment of US\$54.556 billion, as reported by the National Society of Mining, Petroleum, and Energy. The sentencing of 11 peasant leaders by the Boluarte government is a signal to transnational corporations, demonstrating a determination to repress the labor movement opposing the super-exploitation of raw materials by international capital.

The judge handed down the sentences in the context of a growing movement of workers, peasant organizations, youth and indigenous people in the Amazon against the corrupt bourgeois state, President Dina Boluarte, and the widely despised *Fujimorista-Cerronista* alliance, which comprises the far-right Fuerza Popular and the pseudo-leftist Peru Libre party, which exercise de facto rule over Peru from the Congress of the Republic.

This political alliance in Congress—which has an approval rating even lower than that of Boluarte at 4 percent—has exposed Peru Libre as a trap, an ultra-nationalist bourgeois party designed to keep the working class and peasant movements under control within the bourgeois state framework.

This alliance has successfully paralyzed the executive branch, while enacting a series of counter-reforms, including a proposed amnesty for the massive war crimes committed under the dictatorial regime of former President Alberto Fujimori in the 1980s and 1990s. Stripped of many of her powers as president, Boluarte has been left to implement dictatorial measures to quell the growing resistance from the people, relying on the Peruvian security forces for support.



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