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Peruvian government deploys army, locks down Lima, then rescinds order as cost-of-living protests swell

Late Monday night, Peruvian President Pedro Castillo deployed the army, initiated a state of emergency and declared an all-day curfew Tuesday in the capital of Lima and the neighboring port city of Callao as protests over the rapidly-increasing cost of living spread across the country. Later Tuesday, as it became clear that the curfew would only trigger deeper protests, Castillo lifted the curfew.

What began eight days ago as a management-supported strike by truckers over the rising cost of fuel has now developed into a broader movement involving small farmers in the country's impoverished central highlands region, as well as youth and workers in Lima. Inflation in Peru hit a 26-year high Friday, with the cost of consumer goods rising 1.5 percent over the prior month due to the war in Ukraine.



A transportation strike in Huaycan on the outskirts of Lima, Peru, Monday, April 4, 2022. (AP Photo/Martin Mejia)

Although Peru is located 8,000 miles from Ukraine, rising prices caused by the war, US/EU sanctions against Russia and breakdown in supply chains have triggered social protest by workers all over the world. Similarly explosive protests are taking place in Sri Lanka, and large demonstrations and strikes have taken place in Sudan, Albania, Iraq, Tunisia, Britain, Brazil, Turkey, Egypt, Spain, the United States, Canada and elsewhere.

In a midnight address to the nation Monday night, Castillo—a former teachers’ strike leader who won election in 2021 by posturing as left-wing—announced a total ban on public movement in Lima and Callao and ordered millions of people to stay in their homes, barring all but those in essential sectors from leaving even to go to work or make necessary purchases. The shutdown order also bans public assemblies and does not exempt COVID vaccination sites.

In his hastily-announced speech, Castillo said, “In order to re-establish peace and internal order, the cabinet of ministers has agreed to declare the immobilization of the citizenry from 2:00 a.m. until 11:59 p.m. on Tuesday, April 5.”

He ordered protesters to “respect public and private property” and said the size of the demonstrations reflects anger over “demands that were not paid attention to for a long time, that were aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic and now by the conflicts in the international situation.”

The order means a third of the country's population will miss a day of work. Juan Gutierrez, a 45-year-old garment worker, told *Al Jazeera*: "Do you know what it means to lose a day? We have to work to eat." On Tuesday afternoon, the Castillo government announced it was considering expanding the lockdown beyond Tuesday and implementing it on a national scale. Then, hours later, Castillo abruptly canceled the curfew, only adding to the spiraling political crisis as it became clearer that the curfew was only causing deep anger.

Over the weekend, a deal reached between the government and trucking and agricultural industry leaders failed to stop the protests, which had previously been limited to truckers and taxi drivers. The deal not only included the temporary elimination of most gas taxes, but also cuts to food prices and a 10 percent increase to the national minimum wage, which will now be the equivalent of \$332 per month.

The announcement of a deal took place after thousands protested Friday in the city of Huancayo, Junín, roughly 150 miles from Lima. Protesters demanding the lowering of prices were met with brutal state repression. The size and militancy of the demonstrations in Huancayo were notable because the city is a stronghold of the ruling Peru Libre party and many demonstrators explained that they themselves had voted for Castillo, whose approval rating has sunk to the mid-20s.

In the southern city of Ica, impoverished agricultural workers descended on much-hated highway tollbooths and burned them down. Schools in many regions were closed Friday due to protests. A total of five people have been killed thus far.

Blockades of most major highways continued on Monday while spontaneous and socially explosive protests over food shortages took place for the first time in Lima, the third largest city in South America, with a population of 11 million and one of the world's foremost megacities. Significant demonstrations took place in numerous working class districts of the city as viral videos show people breaking into grocery stores in search of food.

In an indication that the movement is gaining support among industrial centers of the working class, the main trade union organization, the General Confederation of Peruvian Workers (CGTP) is attempting to preempt a wildcat strike movement by announcing a

general strike for Thursday, with demonstrations throughout the country and a march to the presidential palace in Lima.

In a press release announcing the strike call, CGTP General Secretary Gerónimo López warned of growing social unrest, declaring that “the people are demanding that the government follow through on its campaign promises by raising the minimum wage to a level that conforms with basic family spending needs.”

Fears that protests will spread further were expressed by right-wing congressperson Jorge Montoya, who told the media Monday that the state of emergency and curfew were necessary because masses of impoverished Peruvians were preparing to “come down from the hills and sack the city, not only here [in Lima] but also in different places throughout the country. The capital is an emblematic site and it must be protected.”

Sections of the Peruvian ruling class who are hostile to the Castillo government from the right have attempted to use the crisis to press for his removal from office. Two parliamentary efforts to bring down Castillo have failed in recent months. Castillo beat his right-wing rival Keiko Fujimori, daughter of former dictator Kenji Fujimori, by a razor-thin margin in last year’s election amid a hysterical anticommunist campaign in the corporate press. Since coming to power, Castillo has worked with the banks and foreign finance capital to implement austerity and has repudiated promises of social reform.

But the right-wing press has made clear that it’s frustration with Castillo is based on his inability to stop the protests. In an editorial Tuesday, the business daily *El Comercio* blamed Castillo for denouncing the protesters as paid provocateurs, a tactic that only galvanized popular support for the protests and “exacerbated the violence in places like Huancayo.”

The editorial criticized Castillo’s justice minister, Félix Chero, for mocking the impact of Tuesday’s all-day curfew on the city’s working class for fear it will trigger even larger protests. When asked how Lima’s impoverished residents will find food if they are required to stay in their homes, Chero said, “I don’t think anyone will go without eating, because this is one day.” *El Comercio* warned, “This comment, in another time and place, would have added fuel to the French Revolution.”

There is growing concern in the media outlets of the major imperialist countries over the growth of protests in places like Peru and Sri Lanka.

“Surging Prices Threaten Governments Everywhere,” warned Bloomberg Tuesday in an article referencing the imposition of a curfew in Lima. “While citizens in some countries may be fine with paying more if it helps pressure Russia to stop the war, plenty of others will simply blame whoever is in charge. That’s a risk for all world leaders, no matter what they think of Putin.”

In an article titled “Fuel protests prompt Lima curfew as Ukraine crisis touches South America,” the *Guardian* wrote of Castillo on Tuesday, “The schoolteacher from a peasant farmer family narrowly won the election last year with the backing of the rural poor. Now many of his former supporters, among them farmers and transport workers, are driving the protests into their second week, while the government strives to bring prices down.”

The *New York Times* also published an opinion piece Tuesday that stated: “Before the war, roughly 811 million people around the world did not have enough to eat. That number could increase tremendously this hunger season, the time between spring planting and fall harvest when food often runs out. The war’s many implications are distressing. Food crises often lead to social unrest, conflict, failed governments and mass migrations. For example, some researchers point to rising food prices as a driver of the Arab Spring upheavals in 2011.”

All indications are that the economic and social crisis in Peru will escalate in the weeks ahead. Peru imports 1.2 million tons of fertilizer a year, over half of which comes from Russia. On March 19, the country declared a state of emergency over food insecurity caused by the rising cost of fertilizer.

Strikes and protests over the rising cost of living are growing throughout Latin America. A strike movement is developing in Brazil among teachers and other sections of the working class, while the Argentinian government announced Tuesday a 6,000 peso cash payment (USD \$52) to pensioners to address rapidly increasing food prices.

The task of socialists is to transform this objective world movement into a self-conscious, working class movement against imperialist war and the capitalist system.

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