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Potato Workers Strike Peru

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Potato growers in the southern Peruvian department of Apurimac took over several main highways in March and April, leading the government to declare a state of emergency. Growers negotiated settlements regarding where the government would purchase large amounts of potatoes and promised to develop roads in the region. The protests marked the second time that the department has seen turmoil since January.

Violence at highway blockades, airport occupation In the town of Andahuaylas, an estimated 20,000 potato farmers took over three major highways and the city airport. Police efforts to remove the striking growers from the airport left at least three wounded, according to local media reports, but police refused to specify whether there had been injuries, saying that they were preparing an official report.

Farmers were calling on the government to purchase the oversupply of tubers at a reasonable price as well as to construct highways and carry out other infrastructure projects that would enable them to ship their products.

President Alejandro Toledo had previously promised to complete such public works. The campesino population of Andahuaylas, which represents about 70% of the region's total population, is suffering the consequences of a drought that has prompted the government to commit to sending food aid to the area.

Starting on April 1, according to police statements, discontented potato growers cut off access routes to the city, about 440 km southeast of Lima. On that date they also occupied the runway of Jose Maria Arguedas airport, though riot police forcibly removed the protesters on April 5. Andahuaylas Mayor Julio Huaraca said that the airport shutdown caused losses of six million soles (about US $1.8 million). The Andahuaylas protest spread through the department of Apurimac, one of the poorest regions of Peru, and into the neighboring province of Chincheros. The government declared a 30-day state of emergency in both Andahuaylas and Chincheros provinces, but the order was not sufficient to keep about 10,000 campesinos from concentrating in the two cities.

In January, Andahuaylas came into the international spotlight when an ultranationalist group calling itself the Movimiento Etnocacerista (ME) and led by former army Maj. Antauro Humala took over a police station, leaving six dead in conflicts between police and the ME (see NotiSur, 2005-01-14). In the latest conflict,

Prime Minister Carlos Ferrero insisted that the government would only dialogue with strikers if tranquility returned to Andahuaylas. He blamed independent Deputy Michel Martinez and his relatives for inciting the growers to favor his personal interests. "The deputy is a potato producer, while his brothers are big suppliers of the product," said Ferrero. Martinez, of the Grupo
Parlamentario Democratico Independiente (GPDI), rejected the accusations outright and called on Ferrero to present proofs of his claim. He said he only owned two hectares of land and said he was not a potato supplier.

Agriculture Minister Manuel Manrique held that the government had taken steps to mitigate the crisis by agreeing to buy 5,000 tons of tubers. But agricultural union leaders said that the instability could continue spreading to other parts of southeastern Peru if the government did not find an adequate solution.

Reynaldo Anco, president of the Frente de Defensa Regional Agrario de Andahuaylas, asked that a high-level commission be formed and that the ministers of agriculture, transport, and health travel to the area to work toward an agreement. Anco denied Ferrero's allegation that suppliers were fomenting the crisis, saying, "In this fight, we, the potato growers, are the protagonists." Anco said the farmers would not dialogue with officials other than Cabinet ministers.

A commission of ministers headed for the region to negotiate a settlement to the strike, apparently meeting the demands of the farmers by April 7. The accord freed the important commercial and agricultural city from the six-day blockade that had kept it isolated from the rest of the country.

The government agreed to buy potato crops from the small growers of Andahuaylas and not from medium-sized or large-scale producers. The purchase price for the 5,000 tons of potatoes that the government agreed to buy was 35 centimos per kilo, or four soles (US$1.20) per 11.5 kg (arroba), an increase from the 90 centimos per arroba (US$0.27) that had been paid previously.

An arroba (11.5 kg) is an old Spanish measure used to quantify crops. The state also promised to asphalt the Ayacucho-Andahuaylas-Abancay highway and to complete construction of the city’s Jose Maria Arguedas public university.

Overproduction, supplier hoarding, or import glut?

Peru's historic crop, the potato, became the source of conflict this April as the government accused various suppliers of hoarding in hopes of profiting from a price hike. Local analysts, however, believe that the resolution to Peru's agrarian crisis needs to come from an agrarian policy that sets up planting in such a way that there would not be excess production of crops like potatoes, crops that cannot be stored or industrialized very well.

Daily newspaper La Republica consulted specialists like Reynaldo Trinidad, director of the magazine Agronoticias, who said the problem did not originate from overproduction of tubers nor from a suppliers' mafia that was hoarding potatoes as it waited for the authorities to pay a better price, as the government argued. Trinidad instead thought there was a decrease in demand for potatoes because consumers were opting for wheat and wheat products like pasta, since subsidized imports of that crop are coming in from the US. Only after the increase in coastal production of potatoes, said Trinidad, had the market been saturated, creating a large-scale price drop.
Furthermore, the additional production in Andahuaylas and other mountainous regions left little marketplace in which to send the product, leaving the farmers to call on the government to intervene. The paradoxical result has been that the price of potatoes, a food that originated in Peru and was cultivated during the pre-Inca era as early as the 8th century BC, has dropped to unsustainable lows.

Peru is the country with the most varieties of potato, about 4,000, but the policies of the government, say some critics, encourage neither the exportation nor value-added processing of the crop. Peruvian fast-food restaurants buy imported potatoes rather than domestically produced ones.

Union leaders said that farmers in the regions of Junin, Huanuco, Ayacucho and Cuzco were also contemplating strikes in order to sell their potato crops. A March report by the Defensoria del Pueblo said that there were 61 unresolved social conflicts in Peru, 32 of which were currently active, including the potato growers' conflict in Apurimac.