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Lima sewage disaster exposes infrastructure neglect in Peru

On January 13, residents of the Azcarrunz neighborhood of east Lima's working-class district of San Juan de Lurigancho (SJL) were forced to evacuate their homes as backup from their toilets and internal pipes flooded their houses with up to a foot of wastewater. The internal flooding was caused by a failure of the sewage system triggered by a pipe break. Nearly 2,000 people were affected in the kilometer-square area.

On January 15, residents were told by state officials to remove everything from their homes that had been touched by the contaminated water. People desperately tried to save their furniture, electrical appliances, beds and other belongings. The Ministry of Health later declared that it had treated nearly double the usual number of people suffering from skin, eye and breathing infections, diarrhea and other conditions as a result of the mass exposure to the flood.

With 1 million inhabitants, SJL is the most populated district in Peru. The majority of its residents belong to the working class and the extremely poor, who work for poverty wages and without benefits for the myriad of small businesses that operate in the district.

Like all districts in the periphery of Lima, SJL's history as a district began with the massive migration from the Andean regions to the capital. The original squatters settled on unused lands previously claimed by landowners until the state gave its recognition to SJL as a new district in 1967.

Since then SJL, along with the other poor neighborhoods on the periphery region (known as *conos*) have borne the full burden of government neglect as government after

government left protection against natural disasters, such as floods, unfunded and virtually ignored improving the lack of access to public water. Meanwhile, they have denied public housing to thousands of residents living in miserable desert shantytowns known as *pueblos jóvenes* (young towns), who have to pay bigger fees for clean water than their urban counterparts.

SJL for years also suffered the kleptocratic rule of Mayor Luis Burgos, from the People's Christian Party. Burgos managed to turn SJL into his private fiefdom thanks to his dealings with the multinationals—such as the disgraced Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht—and his private army of thugs who were involved in usurping control of potentially lucrative lands from their real owners. His own son was killed by rival gangs due to his involvement in this type of crime, known as *trafico de tierras*.

Burgos went into hiding in 2017 after he was brought up on corruption charges, but his mafia-style of government is far from exceptional in Peru. During the regional and local elections of last year, there were many reports of parties being cobbled together to serve as mere political fronts for organized crime outfits that expect state protection once their candidates take office.

“Free-market” proponents rushed in after the flooding to demand the privatization of the public water company, Sedapal, with longtime right-wing figure Jaime de Althaus saying: “Why are we waiting for a private company to manage Sedapal?”

“It [a private company] could be asked for goals and objectives and if it does not deliver, goodbye to it. On the other hand, we cannot demand anything from nor sack Sedapal [a public company].”

There is a sinister background regarding the demand for the privatization of Sedapal. It has been claimed by some journalists that for a long time governments have been starving public companies such as Sedapal of funds (under the guise of “austerity”) in order to declare them bankrupt and carry through their privatization to further profit interests. The flooding in SJL now provides a further rationale for executing this scheme.

Sedapal's trade union (Setupal) responded with a Facebook post in which it clarified that the SJL pipe had been put in place not by Sedapal, but by a consortium established by the Brazilian company Odebrecht and its Peruvian partner Graña y Montero—the biggest Peruvian construction company—which built the nearby metro station “Pirámides del sol.” It said that the pipe was only five years old and that the consortium claimed it would last for 80 years.

The metro itself is being investigated by state attorneys as they think it formed part of the overpriced projects the government of Alan Garcia (2006-2011) arranged in corrupt deals with Odebrecht.

Sedapal, along with the state oil company Petroperu, were the only two public companies that weren't privatized during the neoliberal "reforms" of the first government of Alberto Fujimori (1990-1995). Given the outrage over the fraudulent and rushed character of the privatizations in the 1990s, turning over an essential service like water to a private business was considered too risky.

However, nowadays Sedapal along with other state agencies have ceded the managing of some of their operations to private contractors in what has been termed "Private-Public Associations" ("Asociaciones Público Privados").

With the thousands of lives disrupted by the polluted waters escaping the faulty pipes installed by Odebrecht and Graña y Montero, the disaster in SJL is another proof that the working class bears the full consequences of awarding the managing of essential services to profit-driven private companies.

Azcarrunz resident Rocío García said in an interview with Spain's *El País* that her family was told to throw away everything from their house that was in contact with the water. Hours later, a state officer arrived to verify how much the state would compensate them, but claimed that he could only take into account what remained inside the house. "Isn't that a bad move?" she said. "We are very affected and on top of that they do this to us."

García also claimed that the flooding made them lose everything that had been invested in a small restaurant that they wanted to open on the first floor and that the state didn't take that into account.

Another resident, Joel Bustíos told *El País*, "We want them to be honest. They told us that they would be coming today to fumigate, but there was another flooding and we had to clean up."

While President Martin Vizcarra declared in relation to the flooding that those responsible for it will "have to pay" for the damages—without explaining who exactly they were—the state has announced an individual insurance fund of just 1,000 Sol (approximately US\$299) per household.