

Widespread public sector strikes in Corrientes, Argentina

By Perla Astudillo and Margaret Rees
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Widespread strikes and demonstrations of teachers, tutors, parents, health workers, pensioners and police erupted earlier this month in the northern Argentinian province of Corrientes, creating a sharp governmental crisis. Public sector workers have not been paid for over two months or received their December salary bonus, as the provincial government is bankrupt. Provision of social services has also been suspended.

Thousands of teachers and supporters blockaded traffic in the provincial capital for five hours on June 9. Trade union and church leaders addressed the demonstrations, and demonstrators called out "People of Corrientes take a stand for your rights!" Others chanted, "If this isn't the people, where are the people?" The Corrientes government dismissed the finance minister and health minister on the same day but hostility to the ruling Partido Nuevo (New Party) continued to widen.

Demonstrators have staked out the provincial assembly in an *aguante* (vigil) that has now lasted over two weeks. Monica Espriu, principal of Juan Pajol Normal School told *La Nacion* newspaper: "We have told the legislators that we are watching them, and each time we are greeted with parliamentary antics, but we will not be distracted."

Other workers supported the teachers' strike, with public transport workers and prison guards taking industrial action on June 18 and joining the *aguante*. In the interior of the province, a truck drivers' blockade cut off a major arterial route, as the drivers protested against onerous state charges. On June 21-22, different groups of professional workers from the private sector took to the streets in the capital for the first time. They had not received their salaries and demanded an urgent solution to the financial crisis.

Hundreds of protest tents now dot the square in front

of the Congress building. The national government of Carlos Menem responded to the *aguante* by dispatching 400 paramilitary police to protect Correntino politicians, who were virtually forced to run the gauntlet to get inside. The paramilitary forces surround the legislature—they are even deployed on the roof—and the plaza, armed with guns and water cannon. Earlier Menem said the national government could take direct control of the province "if necessary".

Menem's government at first gave the cash-strapped Corrientes government short shrift financially. Interior Minister Carlos Corach stated that "the Corrientes province has received the last peso that it is entitled to" and "the nation owes nothing, absolutely nothing to Corrientes". However, on June 18, Provincial Governor Pedro Braillard Pocard and Corrientes Mayor Raul Romero Feris met with Menem to plead for emergency financial support. As a result, Menem ordered his Finance Minister to dispatch six million pesos to prop up the Corrientes government. This money will not cover all the back wages and pensions, much less meet future payments—and meanwhile the social crisis is worsening.

The *aguante* continues while the Corrientes Senate has suspended Pocard after finding he has to answer charges of mismanagement of government funds and incompetence. A caretaker governor, Victor Maidana, formerly the vice-governor, was appointed on June 21 because Pocard would not resign. There could be 20-60 days of further parliamentary machinations to oust Pocard.

Maidana has already outlined his economic plans for the province. In one interview he said: "I will not hesitate to slash public spending". He also stated his perspective for the running of the Corrientes government: "Ministers of parliament are secretaries,

and the first priority for them is that the governor exerts his mandate, giving the instructions to his ministers—and they must strictly follow only those orders.”

The Corrientes government is desperately trying to obtain international financing, with three schemes to sell 30-year bonds, but with little success. The province, with a population of one million, has a government debt of \$1.4 billion. It is a primary goods-producing economy, which suffered badly when floods destroyed the key rice crop in 1998. The financial crisis in Corrientes underlines the economic situation in Argentina itself, which is rapidly worsening.

The national economy is in recession—it has contracted by 3 percent in the first financial quarter this year, and the decline is expected to deepen to over 5 percent in the second quarter. Argentinian exports fell 13 percent in the first four months of 1999 and exports to the Mercosur bloc, including Brazil, fell by 27 percent. The Menem government is trying to impose strict budgetary deficit targets agreed with the IMF to obtain \$2.8 billion of loans, and another \$7 billion in contingent lines of credit. The Argentinian economy is expected to contract overall by between 2 to 4 percent in 1999, and unemployment is increasing, with next month's unemployment figures expected to reach 15 percent.

Argentina's last recession, in 1995 after the Mexican peso crisis, saw riots in several poorer provinces when local governments refused to pay wages to public servants. Undoubtedly, this is a factor in the Menem government's prompt dispatch of the paramilitary police to Corrientes, as well as the about-face on its previous refusal to provide financial assistance to the beleaguered Correntino government.

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