

Floods devastate Argentina

By Rafael Azul
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The storms began on April 1 in La Plata, a city of 900,000 and the capital of Buenos Aires Province. Some of its neighborhoods were flooded by more than two meters (six feet) of water. There have been 58 fatalities from these storms, mostly from drowning. In the space of four hours, a record 400 millimeters (16 inches) of rain fell, overwhelming the outdated infrastructure and drainage system. In all, 78,000 homes and 450,000 people were affected, most of them losing all or most of their belongings. The public health system, and disaster preparedness agencies were overwhelmed. Fifty-two of the victims died in La Plata, and six in Buenos Aires, including a transit worker, electrocuted in a subway tunnel.

La Plata, 60 kilometers (40 miles) south of Buenos Aires, has been flooded repeatedly, including in 2002, 2005, 2008 and 2010. Buenos Aires was last flooded in 2001, Santa Fe in 2003 and 2007. The entire region, the northern Pampas, is a gigantic flood plain.

After each flood there were demands, and promises from local politicians, for improvements in the storm drain system and other infrastructure improvements. Engineering reports from the University of La Plata in 2007 had warned city officials of the danger of floods and recommended structural changes in the El Gato River basin to improve drainage. The El Gato runs through San Carlos, Ringuelet and Tolosa, the areas that suffered the most damage. La Plata City Hall appears to have ignored the report. In at least one Buenos Aires neighborhood, emergency pumps that had been set up for contingencies such as this one, failed to operate.

Another storm, on Thursday, April 11, also flooded the city of Santa Fé, on the Paraná River, 476 miles north of Buenos Aires. Some of the neighborhoods in the Western part of the city were flooded by one meter of water. Schools were closed and public transport suspended.

Worst affected by the storms have been the slums that surround Buenos Aires and La Plata, the *villas miserias* (villages of misery), home to immigrant workers and to the most exploited sections of the working poor, and testimony to the degradation of working class living standards driven by decades free market policies of successive governments. About 30 percent of households live under the poverty line in metropolitan Buenos Aires. More than half of these are employed part time for hunger wages, and with no medical benefits, in the informal sector. Also affected were more

established working and middle class neighborhoods, such as Tolosa, in La Plata and Saavedra-Mitre in Buenos Aires.

Tolosa is where the president herself was born. During a visit two days after the storm, residents mobbed Ms. Fernandez, describing the harrowing nights that they had gone through without any assistance, witnessing people trapped in cars or dragged away by the current. “We were left to fend for ourselves,” declared many in the crowd. The president, clearly out of her element, was unable to respond coherently; at one point she did manage a shoulder shrug, blaming it all on the storm (“*la lluvia es la lluvia*,” “the rain is the rain,” she said), implying that no one is to blame, except nature.

In truth, meteorologists had tracked the storm and correctly predicted its path and intensity. Its unusual fury is attributed to the global process of climate change.

Multiplying many times over the storm’s impact was the unplanned, chaotic and profit-driven growth of both these cities. In the aftermath of the debt crisis of 2001 and 2002, zoning rules and engineering reports were pushed aside, and former parks were paved over. There has also been the construction of high-rises that involved altering the course of rivers and streams, and whose foundations block the drainage of water. Last Thursday, residents of the working class Mitre neighborhood demonstrated at a local shopping center, accusing it of being responsible by pumping water directly into the neighborhood.

The floods also revealed the poor state of the public health care. Following a decade of underfunding and cutbacks, clinics and hospitals lacked emergency backup systems to supply electricity and potable water. There were reports of shortages of bandages, gloves, and syringes, not to mention properly equipped mobile hospital units. Last September, the Medical Union (*Sindicato Médico, AMRA*) had raised the alarm about the deterioration of hospitals and had demanded that Governor Daniel Scioli declare a state of emergency for the provincial health care system and take steps to remedy the problems.

According to the AMRA report: “there is a lack of basic supplies in nearly all the facilities for assistance, plus a lack of human resources, particularly in emergency care.”

While the waters have receded, doctors point out that the population now faces the danger of infectious illnesses associated with floods and have called for the speedy distribution of kits to clean and disinfect affected homes, as

well as measures to prevent increases in the mosquito population, and nutritional supplements that go beyond items that are currently being distributed (rice, flour, corn meal).

So far demonstrations and protests have been on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis. This is part of a conscious effort by federal and provincial authorities to keep it that way.

As the anger built up in the affected areas, the Cristina Fernandez administration relied on various mechanisms to frustrate, demoralize and dilute it, including the *Cámpora* Peronist youth movement, the trade unions and the parties of the pseudo-left.

La Cámpora is the official and institutionalized Peronist “youth movement,” one of whose leaders is the president’s son, Máximo Kirchner. *La Cámpora* announced early on that it would send 15,000 of its members into La Plata neighborhoods; officially it was to help clean up and to distribute dry mattresses and other goods.

Their ulterior role is to gather intelligence, to intimidate and to confuse. It intervenes in protests and assemblies, and—in the name of solidarity—attempts to steer them away from a united opposition to the federal government. It spreads the dead-end poison of bourgeois nationalism. This sinister so-called youth movement, allegedly set up to promote human rights and Latin Americanism, is used by the regime to control and defuse dissent. Since 2006, this modern-day iteration of Peronism has served as an organization of political hooligans to guard the president, and as a career path into the Peronist apparatus for “youth leaders.”

La Cámpora functions as a police agency disguised as a youth movement. Two days after the flood, *La Cámpora* members intervened at a La Plata neighborhoods assembly convened to discuss the causes of the floods; they intimidated local photographers, attempted to direct the discussion, and tried to prevent the videotaping of the event until the assembled citizens drove them out. There are charges that members of the group have commandeered donations from the general public and distributed them as their own to select neighborhoods.

The official union federation, the General Confederation of Labor (*Confederación General de los Trabajadores*, CGT), after initially appearing to oppose the government’s policies toward the flood victims, decided against it: “We cannot take hard action, while the tragedy of the floods is still so recent,” declared a CGT leader to the Buenos Aires daily *Clarín*.

Hugo Moyano, leader of the dissident wing of the CGT (*CGT opositora*), criticized the president for not being Peronist enough. “This country is at a breaking point,” warned Moyano, calling for more state intervention in the economy to create jobs. Neither wing of the CGT is proposing any kind of mobilization on behalf of the victims of this storm, many of whom are members of their organizations.

Echoing Moyano were the main pseudo-left parties. Whatever differences they may have with each other, those

political parties—the Workers Party (*Partido Obrero*, PO) and the various groups that emerged from the breakup of MAS (*Movimiento al Socialismo*, Movement for Socialism) after the death of its longtime leader Nahuel Moreno in 1987: the MST (*Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores*, Socialist Workers Movement), PSTU (*Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores Unificado*, United Socialist Workers Party) and PTS (*Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas*, Party of Socialist Workers)—all threw themselves into the solidarity movement, helping distribute aid, while placing the blame of the floods on the neo-liberal free market policies of the current government. Like Moyano, they favor a return to the Peronism of old in which the state enforced tighter regulations on the private sector, while making some concessions to the working class.

The Left Front, an electoral alliance of three pseudo left organizations: PO, the PTS and Socialist Left (*Izquierda Socialista*, IS), issued a statement calling for tax relief, subsidies to the victims, home construction and the self-mobilization of students and trade unions to build an amorphous “left alternative,” similar to Moyano’s call for a “better,” more inclusive capitalism.

Similarly, the MST, through one of its elected Buenos Aires representatives, made a plea for a more generous response from federal and municipal authorities.

The “model no longer works,” warns an April 10th statement from the PSTU, in reference to an economic model that puts debt payments ahead of investments in social infrastructures. What is required, according to the PSTU is an “alternative model”—imposed by a “workers and poor people’s government” that will block further debt payments and distribute those resources to provide health, education, higher wages and decent pensions.

Each one of these pseudo-left organizations leaves out that none of these measures can be carried out under capitalism. The banks and big businesses that currently put profits ahead of the needs of the working class and middle classes and that dictate to Peronist politicians like President Fernandez must be nationalized and placed under public ownership and democratic control.

This requires a break with the bourgeois government of Cristina Fernandez, with the myth of Peronism, and with the politics of the petty-bourgeois left and the building on a revolutionary socialist party in Argentina, that will unite the struggle of workers in the Americas and across the world on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program, the program of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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