

“Left populism”: An attack on socialism by the Argentine pseudo-left

By Andrea Lobo
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The pseudo-left news web site *La Izquierda Diario*—put out by the “Trotskyist Fraction of the Fourth International” (FT-CI), whose main section is the Socialist Workers’ Party (PTS) in Argentina—is calling for “left populism” in response to the coming to power of right-wing governments utilizing populist demagogy, as in the case of new US administration of Donald Trump.

This populist strategy is anti-socialist and has disastrous implications for the working class in Latin America and elsewhere. The FT-CI calls for a “more radical” populism than the one espoused by pseudo-left parties in Europe, namely Podemos and Syriza. The betrayals of the latter—imposing the EU austerity diktats and blocking the emergence of an independent political alternative for the working class—have been central in disorienting and demoralizing workers and paving the way for the political right.

On December 2, the Spanish section of the FT-CI published an article titled “The working class, the left, and right-wing populism.” It began by favorably quoting Owen Jones, the columnist for the *Guardian*, who claims that university students and the middle class on the “left” need their own form of populism, ultimately to defend their own material interests using the support from sections of the working class. Adopting Jones’s approach and referring to Podemos, the FT-CI calls for a populism “that proposes more radical measures.”

Referring to Trump voters, Owen writes: “True, some will be racists and misogynists beyond redemption, but others have the potential to be peeled away if the lure is attractive enough.” Similarly, the FT-CI shuns the “more privileged sectors of the employed working class” who voted for Trump and, they claim, are responsible for the attacks on minority groups.

The FT-CI article states: “In the first place, it is necessary to clarify that the North American working class is composed not only of white heterosexual men between the ages of 45 and 60, who were those who voted in the majority for Trump, together with a large layer of the middle class. The working class of the United State is made up as well of marginalized youth, women, Latinos, Arabs, Afro-Americans, gays, lesbians, etc.”

This is a demoralized petty-bourgeois outlook that rejects the objectively revolutionary role of the working class in capitalist society, reducing workers to a disparate social layer whose

outlook is determined by a collection of racial, gender and sexual identities.

The populism of the Argentine pseudo-left aims at demonstrating a “predisposition to alter” the status quo and “not to administer it,” in the words of two of FT-CI’s main theorists from Argentina, Emilio Albamonte and Matías Maiello. They combine radical phraseology and identity politics for this purpose.

The FT-CI emerged from a split in the early 1990s out of the International Worker’s League (LIT-CI), a group formed by Nahuel Moreno from Argentina, who left the International Committee in 1963 to join the Pabloite United Secretariat. In the documents later explaining their split from Morenoism, the FT-CI explain that they still adhere to his politics prior to the 1980s, including his nationalist and opportunistic adaptations to Peronism and Castroism.

Seeking to follow the same overall path of Syriza, currently in power in Greece, and Podemos, with 71 elected legislators and several mayors in Spain, the FT-CI tries to cover up their class interests and their abandonment of any semblance of a socialist program.

The December 2 article congratulates the “sectors in Podemos and Izquierda Unida that have started to address the need to strengthen the struggle in the streets and the demands of men and women workers.” In another article on December 1, *Clase contra Clase*, the web site of the Spanish section of the FT-CI, praises Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias as one of the main forces behind this “leftward turn.” In Iglesias’s own words, the key slogans for this have been to “go back to the streets” and “make Podemos look like the people.”

In an interview published on December 28, Albamonte declared that the FT-CI’s response to the “polarization that is happening towards the right and left within the ruling class,” out of the 2008 crisis, has been to develop “a party of tribunes of the people,” referring to Lenin’s use of the term in *What Is to be Done?*

According to Albamonte, Lenin’s idea of tribunes meant “for workers not to have *only* a corporatist or syndicalist thought but for them to talk to other sectors of the exploited and oppressed and do what Gramsci called ‘hegemony,’ ” which he defines as “talking to women, talking to youth, talking to workers

without collective agreements, to the most precarious, to the newly hired, and leading them in struggle.”

The FT-CI’s use of Leninist jargon to justify a supra-class, anti-socialist populist movement is preposterous. Lenin carried out a decades-long struggle against populism in works like *What the ‘Friends of the People’ Are and How They Fight the Social Democrats* and ruthlessly exposed its role in blocking the development of socialist consciousness in the working class.

Albamonte’s “party of tribunes,” like the “party of the 99 percent,” seeks to subordinate the interests of the broader mass of workers in Latin America to the attainment of a more favorable redistribution of wealth from the richest 1 percent to the more affluent sections of the middle class.

FT-CI and Podemos both cite the writings of the late Argentine postmodernist and “post-Marxist” academic Ernesto Laclau and his intellectual and personal partner, Chantal Mouffe. In a 2014 obituary for Laclau, Iñigo Errejón, number two of Podemos, explains that Laclau’s “neo-Gramscian school of thought” aims at solving the “irreplaceable need for...generating imaginaries that can unite and mobilise people. This power is hegemony...the joining-together of fragmented groups and neglected demands that become a political ‘us’ with a will to power.”

Rejecting the existence of the working class and of the objective socioeconomic basis for socialism, Laclau contrasted a supra-class “us” to a “ ‘them,’ who are held responsible for whatever problems exist.” In a December interview with the *Nation*, Mouffe said: “The task of the left is to construct ‘a people’” based on the “equivalence” of the demands of workers and those “of the feminists, civil rights, and different movements.”

The “us” and “them” for the FT-CI are clearly reflected in their class outlook and political record. Like Podemos and Syriza, the politics of the FT-CI reflect the interests of layers of the upper middle class, which have seen their material fortunes increasingly tied to those of the financial and corporate elites.

In Argentina, the percentage of households making more than \$50 per day (purchasing parity) increased more than in any other Latin American country: from 6.1 percent to 28.3 percent between 2000 and 2012, according to a 2014 Inter-American Development Bank study. Today, the top 20 percent of income earners in Argentina receive about half of the total personal income.

After the 1998-2002 recession in Argentina, a fast GDP growth of 6.5 percent per year—mainly a result of a “boom” in commodity prices—allowed the ruling class to redistribute some of its income. However, today the bottom half of income earners still make less than the “minimum and vital salary” of about \$500 per month. In the wake of the 2008 crisis, the top 20 percent grew even wealthier.

Facing a recession in Argentina and world economic stagnation, these forces fear that the growth of their economic

privileges will be undermined by increasing social unrest in response to the policies of right-wing President Mauricio Macri.

Their demagogic slogans like “make the rich pay for the crisis,” their focus on electing more legislators to the coalition they lead (the FIT) in the Argentine Congress, their appeals to the right-wing union bureaucracies and petty-bourgeois movements like Ni Una Menos to lead the struggles against the Macri administration all reflect their pro-capitalist politics and class orientation.

Errejón describes the Podemos program as the “Latin-Americanization of southern European politics...not to copy, but to translate its experience”; in other words, they aim to carry out betrayals parallel to those of Perón and Allende, whose populism—and that of other left nationalist movements like Castroism and Sandinismo, and the Pabloite tendencies that adapted to these forces—disarmed workers in Latin America. The result was the absolute subordination of workers, peasants, and youth to the interests of US and European banks and corporations, under the rule of the repressive US-backed military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s that murdered, tortured, and disappeared hundreds of thousands across the region.

In order to confront the mounting social attacks and increasingly violent and widespread repression at a time of emerging extreme right-wing governments in the United States and Europe, workers in Argentina and in the rest of Latin America need to fight back on the basis of a revolutionary program of international socialism by building sections of the International Committee and opposing the efforts by pseudo-left forces such as the PTS and FT-CI to employ bourgeois populism in order to block the political independence of the working class.

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