

National strike in Argentina as opposition to austerity grows

By Rafael Azul
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At a March 7 rally of Argentina's main trade union confederation, the CGT, workers booed and denounced the trade union leadership, demanding a national general strike of all workers against the right-wing government of Mauricio Macri. The CGT stonewalled the demand. Several months earlier, the CGT had met with Macri and guaranteed they would keep the lid on social discontent and "preserve social peace" long enough for his government to implement pro-corporate reforms.

But March and April have seen a wave of street protests, strikes and rallies by the Argentine working class, in Buenos Aires and across Argentina.

A series of strikes, road closures and protests by teachers, autoworkers and other sections of the working class against sackings and attacks on wages and benefits are continuing this week. Across Buenos Aires, teachers are now voting on the next steps to take in their struggles. These include a strike for an indefinite time, weekly walkouts and other forms of struggle.

The protests have been massive. On March 22, over 300,000 teachers marched and rallied in Buenos Aires.

On March 24, tens of thousands in many cities across Argentina (and 100,000 in Buenos Aires) participated in the March of Memory, Truth and Justice, which marked the 41st anniversary of the 1976 military *coup d'etat*. Except for a 100-word statement from 1984 on his Facebook page, Macri made no official declaration. The Macri government has downplayed the significance of that coup, insisting that the number of victims fell far short of the accepted figure of 30,000. No official event was organized.

On April 3, tens of thousands of striking teachers in the southern state of Santa Cruz surrounded the state government office and refused to let Peronist governor

Alicia Kirchner (sister of ex-president Nestor Kirchner) leave until 4:00 am.

This social tension made it impossible for the CGT to continue stonewalling the broadly supported demand for a general strike. Fearing the prospect of social explosion, the CGT announced a one-day strike, scheduled for today, April 6.

There is broad hostility to the Macri government's reform plan. Macri's measures since he assumed the presidency in December 2015, with the support of the national legislature (including both the Kirchnerista and the Massa wings of the Peronist movement), have been combined with attacks on basic rights, jobs, housing, health care, pensions, and freedom of speech and assembly.

The Macri administration wants to limit wage and salary increases to less than 20 percent, in several installments, amounting to a substantial cut in real wages. Official unemployment tops 10 percent of the labor force. Tens of thousands of workers have been sacked and suspended in the auto, printing, oil, electronics, consumer goods, steel and food industries. One third of the population lives below the poverty line, and last year's inflation rate reached 30 percent, driving down living standards.

Macri has especially targeted teachers, who have responded by striking, demanding wage increases that correspond to the rate of inflation. Teachers have rejected offers of 19 percent wage hikes, in return for accepting concessions in working conditions. At the same time the government is illegally refusing to pay teachers for days on strike.

Full of fear that workers' anger is rapidly getting out of control, as it has in the past (the 1969 *Cordobazo*, for instance, or the protests of December 2001 that brought down the government of Fernando De La Rúa),

the CGT is using the one-day strike as another offer of class collaboration to Macri and the Argentine ruling class. Breaking with tradition, the CGT announced that there would be no mobilizations, marches or rallies in Buenos Aires on April 6. A CGT leader told workers to “stay home with their *Mate* tea.”

CGT leader Héctor Daer declared that the purpose of this general strike was to “generate debate in society, not only among workers, but among middle layers and intellectuals,” over the social and economic reforms.

Juan Carlos Schmid, the CGT’s general secretary acknowledged the “there is a generalized discontent among many layers in the population” over the impoverishment created by Macri’s economic measures. Other bureaucrats have spoken to the press about their concerns that the trade unions may lose control of social discontent.

The CGT, with a membership of more than two and a half million, is the largest union federation in Argentina. The Argentine trade unions have a long history of class collaboration, corporatism and anti-socialism, going back to the 1930s and the Uribe dictatorship. The CGT under the regime that followed the 1943 coup established close links with the populist nationalist anticommunist military, and played a big role in the installation of Juan Perón as president (1945-55, 1973-74). Peron integrated the trade unions into his government and the populist *Justicialis ta* Party.

Throughout succeeding civilian administrations, interrupted by five military governments and a brutal military fascist dictatorship, the CGT leaders have continued with their criminal betrayal of the Argentine working class.

For their part, the pseudo-left Morenoist Socialist Workers Party (PTS) and the Workers Party (PO) limited their criticism of the 24-hour national strike to the absence of marches, calling instead for an “active strike.” Beyond that they present no perspective or program to orient and unite the working class internationally.

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