

Argentine teachers launch protest strike

By Rafael Azul
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On Tuesday April 11, Argentine teachers carried out a 24-hour national protest strike against the repression by Buenos Aires police of a teachers' rally at the national legislature two days earlier.

The teachers had set out to install an "an itinerant school", a tent in which to conduct classes as a form of protest. They were prevented from doing so by the police attack, which included the use of pepper spray and beatings with nightsticks, as the protesters chanted, "We educate your children, stop beating us!"

The symbolic school recalled the teachers' protest tent against the neo-liberal policies of President Menem (Peronist, 1989-99) that also targeted teachers' wages and working conditions, in which teachers carried out rotating hunger strikes during 1,003 days. While that tent became an iconic symbol of workers repudiation of Menem's policies, it was also the union bureaucracy's way of maintaining the teachers' struggle at the level of protest, allowing Menem to proceed with the wave of privatizations that radically transformed Argentine society.

So it was with the "itinerant school". A spokesperson for SUTEBA, one of the four teachers unions, described the protest tent as an alternative to striking and Sonia Alesso, president of the Federation of Argentine Education Workers (CETERA), as she denounced the repression, declared that the idea of the "itinerant school" had been "a creative response" to protesting.

In fact, government authorities reversed themselves and the "itinerant school" was off and running this Wednesday, signaling that the order to repress may have been an overzealous response by government officials. Seeing it in this light, the one-day strike by teachers on April 11, like its national counterpart on April 6, was merely a vehicle for workers to express their discontent while the real negotiations affecting their jobs and living standards take place behind their

backs.

The Macri government, whose austerity big business policies echo those of Menem, is determined not only not to give in to the demands of education workers, but to set a pattern to discipline the entire working class.

On the day of the strike, Macri, speaking at a conference of business entrepreneurs, defended the repression of the teachers and denounced the strike. "They break the law and then go on strike," declared Macri.

Education Minister Esteban Bullrich condescendingly scolded the participants in Sunday's rally stating that the police violence "is also a form of education." Alleging that the teachers had not obtained "formal" permission to set up the structure, Bullrich added ominously: "When a police officer gives an order, enforcing a law, it must be obeyed." In the face of shocking video evidence, Buenos Aires officials have cynically declared that the "police acted defensively."

The repression of the teachers followed by a few days of attacks by naval troops and police against workers blocking the Pan American highway and other roads during the general strike of April 6.

Following several months of agreement and relative peace with the union bureaucracies, Macri administration is now escalating and deliberately creating an atmosphere for repression and police attacks.

Assisting Macri is the governor of Buenos Aires Province, María Eugenia Vidal. Vidal is demanding that teachers' wages be tied to concessions on absenteeism and teacher evaluations. In the past, she has threatened to withdraw government recognition of the teachers unions. Vidal has repeatedly made it plain that the government's policy on education does not stop at wages: "We are engaged in a broader battle than wages," she recently declared.

A recent comment in the Madrid daily *El Pais*

compared Vidal's relationship with the teachers to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's year-long battle with the British coal miners in 1984-85. The miners' defeat had disastrous consequences for the British working class.

The parallel is fitting. In the early months of his presidency, Macri made agreements with the Argentine trade union bureaucracy, in which the 2016 wage increases for teachers was set at the national level and set the benchmark for the rest of the working class in the byzantine yearly wage-setting process known in Argentina as *paritarias*, which feebly compensate workers for the ravages of the previous year's inflation. Now, Macri has upped the ante and provoked the current battles with wage offers that amount to a draconian cut in living standards that teachers find totally unacceptable, tied to a package of concessions.

Equally provocative was the repression of the teachers' symbolic "itinerant school" on bogus charges that there was no formal approval, utilizing rules that the government turns on and off as it sees fit.

The attacks on living standards have been accompanied by a media campaign depicting the teachers as shirkers and representing their struggle as an attack on the rights of children. The aim is to exploit middle class resentment, and create a base of support for greater attacks on the rights of workers.

Due to inflation last year, Argentine educators' real wages and living standards have fallen. Inflation this year is anticipated to be 25 percent.

In the on-going *paritarias*, the teachers unions are demanding a 35 percent wage increase in national negotiations. Given that the rate of inflation in 2016 was 40 percent, their modest demand at best compensates for past price increases. The government promotes the fiction that, as a result of Macri's austerity measures and tight money policies, inflation this year will be restrained to less than the 19 percent ceiling (in three payments) it is placing on wage increases.

Furthermore, Macri insists that teacher salaries are a provincial matter and should be subject to provincial *paritarias*, knowing full well that the provinces' ability to grant wage increases are constrained by cuts in federal education grants.

According to a recent report, the monthly salary for a teacher with ten years seniority in the majority of

Argentina's provinces is below the poverty line for a family of four, of 13,670 pesos (900 US dollars). Nationally the average is 11,455 pesos (85 percent of poverty). Only in some of the southern Patagonian provinces, where living costs are higher than the rest of the country, do teachers' wages exceed the national poverty line.

Despite the draconian concessions demanded by Macri, the CETERA union bureaucracy has no intention of launching a real fight. On the contrary, it will continue to negotiate away educators' rights and conditions. On March 1, a week before the launching of a series of strikes, CETERA leader Sonia Alesso declared the federation's willingness to negotiate and indicated her surprise that Macri had changed the rules of the game relative to 2016. Negotiations will take place, as they did then, largely behind the backs of the membership.

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