

The May 29 national strike and Argentina's economic, political and social crisis

By Rafael Azul
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On May 29, Argentine workers carried out a 24-hour general strike to protest collapsing living standards, the closure of factories and destruction of jobs. The work stoppage involved key sectors of the working class, including teachers, and dock and transportation workers, as well as steel, auto and other industrial workers.

This was the largest strike to hit the government of President Mauricio Macri—the fifth since 2015—and came on the heels of one called on April 30. Economic activity in the city of Buenos Aires and the suburbs that surround it, home to 15 million people (one third of Argentina's population) was nearly paralyzed. The strike was also widely observed along the industrial belt that borders the Paraná River, in Córdoba, Rosario and other large urban and industrial centers.

With its strike call, Argentina's trade union bureaucracy appeared to signal an end to years of a semi-formal truce with the Macri administration and a turn toward the Peronist electoral campaign of Alberto Fernandez and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner for president and vice-president in elections set for October. The reality, however, is that the Argentine trade unions have facilitated nearly 20 years of attacks on jobs and living standards, under both the Macri administration and the Peronist governments that preceded it.

Current surveys of voters strongly suggest that Macri's *Cambiamos* coalition will not be re-elected in national elections that will take place this October. Conditions of economic implosion that have resulted in plummeting living standards and pensions, increasing unemployment and attacks on working conditions, particularly for the youth, have turned the working class and the sections of the petty bourgeoisie against Macri's right-wing government.

The May national strike was made to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the historic *Cordobazo*, the working-class rebellion of May 1969 in the industrial city

of Córdoba. The Córdoba rebellion, and other urban working-class rebellions, marked the beginning of the end of the bloody Onganía military dictatorship (1966-1970).

Lacking revolutionary leadership, and betrayed by Peronism, Stalinism, Castroism and Morenoism, in 1969 Argentine workers were not able to go further than ridding the nation of the Onganía regime. Within seven years, a far more repressive fascist-military regime was to seize power, killing, imprisoning and torturing tens of thousands of workers.

Last week's national protest strike and all those that have preceded it (under both the corporatist Peronist governments of Nestor Kirchner and Cristina Fernandez, and the current right-wing *Cambiamos* administration) have taken the form of cynical rituals, designed to divert the militancy of the working class under the wing of the trade union apparatus and the ruling class.

Harsh government-imposed austerity policies, beginning in 2015 and worsened by a debt deal with the International Monetary Fund, have imposed budget cuts in combination with regressive food, utility and fuel price increases that exceed the rates of inflation with the purpose of shifting resources from the working class and lower middle classes to the Argentine oligarchy and the financial sector, nationally and internationally. Those policies have pushed millions of workers, young people and retirees below the poverty line.

This March, a study conducted by the Social Debt Observatory of the Argentine Catholic University (UCA) revealed the urgency of the situation. The report indicated that between 2017 and 2018 “multi-dimensional poverty” (using six criteria to measure poverty: food, health, education, employment and social security, education, and housing) increased from 26 percent to 31.3 percent of households—nearly 13 million people.

Agustín Salvia, who directed the UCA study, pointed out to the Buenos Aires news blog *Infobae* that “the study

indicates a strong increase in multi-dimensional poverty in the context of inflation and economic stagnation. In essence, behind this increase is the collapse of household incomes, due to the fall in wages, increasing unemployment, and more temporary and part time jobs”.

Salvia reported that 20 percent of workers do not have steady formal jobs: “This social layer, nearly 20 percent of the population, has been marginalized. While it is offered some monetary assistance, it is denied effective measures of economic, social and human development; measures that are absent from the political agenda and debate.”

The UCA numbers paint a devastating picture.

According to the official rate of joblessness, more than 9 percent of the labor force is unemployed. That is only the tip of the iceberg: over 34 percent of workers are underemployed and depend on contingent or temporary jobs, particularly young workers (up from 33.5 percent in 2017).

Six million Argentines, 7.9 percent, do not have enough to eat (up from 6.2 percent at the end of 2017). Another 28.2 percent lack sufficient resources for medical care and medicines (up from 26.6 percent).

The percentage of people living in inadequate housing (including shanties, crowded tenements, or lacking water and sewer services) rose to 27.1 percent in 2018.

The UCA report also raised the alarm in relation to the decay of Argentine education. Children are now denied the right to decent primary and middle schools. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of students go to school hungry every day.

The education crisis is not new; a 2018 statistical study by education historian *Rómina de Luca* reports that since 2012, under the Kirchner administrations, only 40 percent of seventh grade students complete twelfth grade. While this phenomenon is partially offset by a jump in adult-school attendance, rates of functional illiteracy have increased.

The most affected is the population of the industrial belt that surrounds Buenos Aires, where the rate of “multi-dimensional poverty” is now 41.1 percent (up from 34.9 in 2017). Forty-one percent of school leavers in Greater Buenos Aires are deemed functionally illiterate.

The official trade union federations organized no rallies for the May 29 strike. In Buenos Aires, there were marches into the city itself from the periphery, and confrontations with Buenos Aires police seeking to block the protests.

The demonstrators, many of whom rallied in downtown

Buenos Aires, were organized by pseudo-left groups such as the Workers Left Front (FIT), the Workers Socialist Movement (MST) and trade union dissidents; they carried signs denouncing social conditions—one of them read “Macri equals Hunger”—and applauding the “green-wave” of pro-abortion activists that had rallied days before.

These tendencies are proposing the forging of a broad electoral front for the upcoming October elections, laying the foundations for the creation of an Argentine version of the Spanish Podemos or Greek Syriza parties in order to strangle and betray the struggles of the working class.

Workers in Argentina are confronting the same reality as workers across the world, in Venezuela, Mexico, Turkey, the US and Europe: joblessness, unemployment, hunger, and the destruction of democratic rights, which cannot be resolved with national protest strikes, nor with the national reformist programs advanced by the pseudo-left.

In the wake of last week’s national strike, the class issues that were raised by the *Cordobazo* of 1969, and which are posed today in a far sharper form, urgently require building a revolutionary socialist leadership, based on the international unity of the struggles of the working class, to educate and lead the struggles of the working class, to put an end to capitalism and usher in a socialist society.

Toward that goal, the central task in Argentina and Latin America is the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International

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