

One year after its conference to “refound” the Fourth International Argentina’s Partido Obrero splits with longtime leader Jorge Altamira

By Bill Van Auken
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Argentina’s Partido Obrero (PO) has been rocked by a bitter split, with its official leadership denouncing Jorge Altamira, one of the party’s founders in 1964, its long-time leader and five-time presidential candidate, for breaking with PO and forming a separate and hostile organization. Altamira has responded by insisting that he is leading a “public faction” and that he will not be driven out “even with bullets.”

At a national congress held in April, Altamira was removed from the party leadership and reduced to an alternate member of its central committee. On June 23, he and his supporters organized a meeting to found the public faction, while the PO leadership declared that the action represented a “split” with the party.

This de facto split comes little over a year after Altamira and the Partido Obrero convened in Buenos Aires a conference of the Committee to Refound the Fourth International (CRFI). Like previous efforts to “reconstruct” the Fourth International, the assembly in Buenos Aires was based on right-wing nationalist policies and the repudiation of the entire history of the Fourth International. It had the infamous distinction, however, of advancing a proposal for “refounding” the world party established by Leon Trotsky through a political alliance with Russian Stalinism.

The ongoing blowup of the PO is the direct product of the unprincipled nationalist policies that underlay the conference last year.

There have been angry public recriminations, with the official leadership charging Altamira with setting up a parallel organization, collecting finances from its supporters and organizing its own meetings and activities independently of the PO. Altamira’s faction has countered with charges that the official leadership has expelled and censored members, spied on them and broken into the local offices controlled by his supporters in the dead of night to seize computers and other assets.

Both factions have organized press conferences to denounce each other, and Altamira—a fixture in left Argentine politics for decades—has been interviewed widely by the Argentine media on the subject of the split. Each faction has taken the other to court.

The immediate political context of this bitter faction fight is the upcoming Argentine election, with mandatory party primaries taking place next week and the general election set for October 27. The right-wing incumbent President Mauricio Macri is being challenged by the Peronist slate of Alberto Fernández for president and former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner for vice president. The Partido Obrero is engaged in what it has described as an “electoral adaptation that justifies itself in the need to co-opt the left wing of Kirchnerism,” i.e., Peronism.

It is within this framework that tactical divisions have arisen. Altamira has accused his opponents in the party leadership of “electoralism” and “parliamentarism,” while they have denounced him as a “propagandist.”

In a long statement titled “Why a public faction of the Partido Obrero”

Altamira and his supporters base their opposition to the official leadership of the PO on what they describe as not only his exclusion from the leadership, but also an attempt to erase him from the party’s history.

They go on to portray the party leadership as an “apparatus” engaged in an “adaptation to the political process in the name of ‘realism’... an electoral adaptation to the political crisis.” They further charge that the PO has failed to differentiate itself from other pseudo-left Morenoite groups with which it is united in the common electoral bloc, the Left and Workers Front (FIT), challenging them only over organizational matters such as the rotation of 40 parliamentary and provincial posts held by elected FIT candidates.

Nowhere, however, does Altamira attempt to explain how it is that the “apparatus” that was recruited and politically trained under his leadership has moved so far to the right and turned against him.

The PO leadership has accused the “public faction” of defending an “indisputable lifetime leadership” for Altamira, whom they charge with “anti-electoral and anti-parliamentarist cretinism.”

Much of the debate boils down to electoral slogans, with the PO leadership accusing Altamira of capitulating to the Kirchner faction of Peronism by advancing the demand of “Out with Macri.” They further suggest that the opposition is driven by the party’s failure to choose Altamira and his supporters as candidates.

Altamira charges that the leadership of the PO is failing to advance a revolutionary program in the elections and thereby adapting to both Macri and the Peronists.

The split takes place under conditions where the FIT electoral coalition has incorporated even more right-wing forces and amid calls, particularly from the PTS (Socialist Workers Party), the largest of the factions to emerge out of the breakup of the old MAS (Movement toward Socialism) after the death in 1987 of Argentine revisionist Nahuel Moreno, for the formation of a “united party of the left.” Such a formation would be called upon, in the event of a sharp intensification of the crisis of Argentine capitalism, to play a similar role to that of Syriza in Greece in repressing and betraying the struggles of the working class.

Altamira himself wrote on this political trajectory in 2017, accurately describing the PTS as “Podemos in diapers” (Podemos en pañales). This insight, however, did nothing to disrupt the unprincipled electoral front between the PO and the PTS, which both factions support. This year the FIT is running a ticket headed by Nicolás del Caño of the PTS for president and Romina Del Plá of the PO for vice-president.

This electoral alliance, replete with corrupt political horse-trading over ballot lines and parliamentary posts, is a clear manifestation of the petty-bourgeois nationalist character of the parties involved and has nothing whatsoever to do with Marxism.

As Trotsky wrote in relation to the struggle against fascism in Germany:

“The idea of nominating a candidate for president on the part of the united workers’ front is a radically false one. A candidate can be nominated only on the basis of a definite program. The party has no right to sacrifice during elections the mobilization of its supporters and the recording of its strength.”

Amidst all of the charges and counter-charges within the PO, what emerges most clearly is that both factions base themselves entirely upon a nationalist orientation, subordinating the strategy and principles of socialist internationalism to the most vulgar nationalist calculations.

Significantly, after ousting him from the party leadership and rejecting his programmatic document at the party congress, the official leadership decided to place Altamira in charge of the Partido Obrero’s international relations. This was an area of work that they obviously viewed as of no major consequence, and where they believed the former party leader could do little harm to their nationalist project.

This essential feature of the split in the Partido Obrero wholly confirms the analysis made by the *World Socialist Web Site* of the conference held in Buenos Aires last year to “refound” the Fourth International.

As the WSWS exposed in its June 7, 2018 statement, Workers Party in Argentina seeks to “refound” Fourth International in alliance with Stalinism:

What is actually meant by “reconstruction” is the amalgamation of politically heterogeneous organizations, without any agreement on essential questions of program and strategy. The only point on which they absolutely agree is the right of each organization to pursue whatever national policy that is deemed to be in its own best interests. This utterly unprincipled approach to politics has absolutely nothing in common with Trotskyism. Its attitude to the experiences and lessons accumulated by the Fourth International since 1938 is defined by a combination of political hostility, theoretical indifference, shortsighted national opportunism and the crudest ignorance.

Nothing expressed this attitude more conclusively than the invitation to Darya Mitina, the secretary of international affairs of the Stalinist United Communist Party of Russia (OKP) to deliver a major speech to the conference.

Mitina, a rabid Stalinist with close ties to the Russian state, was presented to the conference by Altamira as “a comrade who speaks in the name of the tradition of communism in Russia, which for her would be Stalinism,” as if this was some insignificant question of national culture. Indeed, Mitina has boasted on her blog of laying flowers at Stalin’s tomb twice a year, while the website of her party extols the extermination of Trotskyists and the entire leadership of the October Revolution in the political genocide that accompanied the Moscow Trials.

The WSWS subsequently exposed Mitina’s cementing of ties to far-right and neo-fascist movements in Europe based upon their favorable attitude toward the government of Vladimir Putin. In her travels around the world, she tailors her pro-Kremlin speeches to suit different audiences of Stalinists, neo-Nazis and white supremacists, as well as pseudo-leftist parties like the Partido Obrero.

This was the “comrade” that Altamira and the rest of the PO leadership invited to the platform to deliver one of main addresses to a membership that was never informed about her political connections. Neither the PO’s “public faction” nor its official leadership, now battling over party regime and election slogans, has any differences over this politically criminal alliance.

Neither faction has challenged Altamira’s declaration to the conference that forging ties to elements like Mitina provided a far superior road to the

“refounding” of the Fourth International than the “sectarian” conception of a “do it yourself” international,” i.e., the struggle to build a genuine international party by forging a principled unity based upon a common world program and perspective.

As part of the factional struggle within the PO, both the “public faction” and the official leadership sent delegates to Athens, Greece, last month seeking mediation of the dispute by the PO’s partners in the Committee to Refound the Fourth International, the EEK (Workers Revolutionary Party) of Greece and the Turkish DIP (Revolutionary Workers’ Party).

Chiefly responsible for organizing this mediation was the EEK’s general secretary, Savas Michael-Matsas, whose ties to the PO are based on their shared nationalist orientation.

That such a figure should be the mediator in the split within the PO speaks volumes about the unprincipled character of this dispute. Michael-Matsas’ entire political history is bound up with opportunist political maneuvering.

In 1985, he carried out an unprincipled split with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in opposition to the political struggle the ICFI had initiated against the nationalist and opportunist degeneration that led to the collapse of the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) led by Gerry Healy. Rejecting any discussion with other sections, he broke with the ICFI and aligned himself with Healy based on the calculation that this would free him to pursue his nationalist politics in Greece. This was quickly realized through a series of political alliances with the Greek Stalinist Communist Party, the bourgeois PASOK party and the trade union bureaucracy.

As David North, then national secretary of the Workers League, the predecessor organization to the Socialist Equality Party in the US, wrote in a 1989 article *The Demise of Savas Michael’s “New Era”*:

From 1987 on, *Socialist Challenge*, the newspaper of the WRP [EEK] became the local Athens house-organ of the Gorbachev bureaucracy. There is ample reason to believe that Michael’s services to the Gorbachev regime were financially rewarded. Similar propaganda services rendered by *Socialist Challenge* to Middle Eastern regimes and bourgeois nationalist movements had previously been offered by Michael in exchange for special subsidies of which rank-and-file members were not informed. Indeed, in one of his own documents, Healy noted in passing that Michael has “close contact with the Libyans, the Soviet Embassy, the CP and the PLO.”

It was Michael-Matsas who served as the middleman in organizing the trip to Argentina by Darya Mitina, with whom he has maintained close political relations over more than a decade. He has introduced her to pseudo-left circles in Europe and now Latin America, while she has helped Michael-Matsas forge ties to Russian Stalinism.

His alliance with Altamira is based on a common contemptuous attitude toward the history of the Fourth International and a shared nationalist orientation.

The mediation meeting staged by Michael-Matsas proved farcical. The official leadership of the PO issued a statement on its proceedings, claiming that the delegates sent by Altamira’s faction had “refused to continue the discussion on a compromise document to end the splitting action and guarantee the reunification of the party” that had been presented by Michael-Matsas, the Turkish group and a Finnish organization.

The statement quoted Michael-Matsas as delivering a judgment that the split reflected “the pressures of the class struggle in this stage of the bankruptcy of world capitalism.” Based upon this profound analysis, the mediators presented their proposal, which they dubbed “The Armistice of

Athens.” This, according to the PO leadership, consisted of a call for the reintegration of Altamira and his supporters into the party, a continuation of the discussion in the national committee, an end to lawsuits brought by both sides, an investigation into the spying charges and the end of the Altamira group’s “parallel election campaign.”

The latter was the most important for the leadership of the PO, which is concerned that the Altamira group’s campaigning in the elections on its own slogans could upset their striving for parliamentary posts.

The statement claimed that the Altamira group refused to accept the deal and ended the discussion, saying it would reply later in writing.

This statement provoked a response from Michael-Matsas, who said that the account was “marred by a series of factual mistakes and, in our opinion, incorrect interpretation of certain other facts.”

What factual errors had been committed and what other facts were incorrectly interpreted, Michael-Matsas did not bother to say, indicating that he would pronounce further on the matter after the end of the EEK’s summer camp. Thus far, there has been nothing more from the author of the “Armistice of Athens.”

The Altamira group responded with its own statement, denouncing the official leadership for carrying out “provocations,” “defamation,” “harassment,” “threats” and “censorship.”

Despite the vitriolic denunciations, what clearly emerges from the squalid proceedings in Athens is that there are no genuine principled differences between the two factions, merely a bitter struggle over organizational methods and electoral tactics within a party dominated by petty-bourgeois nationalism and opportunism.

Their so-called international grouping, with the political charlatan Michael-Matsas in the lead, proved itself wholly incapable of providing any analysis of the objective source of the split or drawing any lessons from the dispute in what is by far the largest affiliate of their “Committee to Refound the Fourth International.”

What is striking about the factional split within the Partido Obrero is that neither faction has anything to say about the international perspective and affiliations of the party, or for that matter, about virtually anything taking place outside the borders of Argentina.

The reactionary character of this national provincialism finds its sharpest expression in the PO’s choice of international allies. Over the course of some 45 years it has engaged in various alliances proclaiming the “reconstruction” or “refounding” of the Fourth International, all of which have been based on an explicit agreement to reject the entire history of the Fourth International and, in particular, the protracted struggle against revisionist anti-Trotskyist tendencies—most prominently Pabloism and Shachtmanism—which sought its liquidation.

Attempts to forge international organizations on this basis—as well as on the common understanding that each of the organizations involved will be free to pursue its own nationally based policies—have inevitably fallen apart. This was the case with the PO’s alliance with Pierre Lambert’s OCI (International Communist Organization) in the early 1970s and the subsequent short-lived attempt to cement an alliance with Nahuel Moreno.

The latest attempt at such an alliance, unveiled in the Buenos Aires conference of April 2018, however, represented the most explicit repudiation of Trotskyism.

As we stated in our previous analysis of the Buenos Aires conference, “The pretense of ‘refounding’ the Fourth International in alliance with Stalinism must be taken as a warning to the working class. It represents a bid to forge new political instruments to subordinate the working class to the bourgeoisie precisely at a point where a resurgence of the class struggle is emerging on every continent.”

Behind the split in the Partido Obrero, despite all of its vitriol, both factions are guided by a petty-bourgeois nationalist orientation that leads precisely to this outcome. The turn toward Russian

Stalinism—representing a further putrefaction of what Trotsky described as a counterrevolutionary agency of imperialism—paves the way to alliances with sections of the Argentine bourgeoisie and even right-wing forces in suppressing the struggles of the Argentine working class.

The decisive question for all those in Argentina and throughout Latin America seeking to defend Trotskyism is the assimilation of the lessons of the 66-year-long struggle of the International Committee against Pabloite revisionism. This anti-Trotskyist tendency has played an immensely destructive political role throughout the region, from the promotion of Castroism and guerrilla war, to the attempts to subordinate the working class to the Workers Party in Brazil and various bourgeois nationalist trends such as “Bolivarian Socialism,” to the opportunist electoral alliances of the PO and various Morenoite factions in Argentina. We urge readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* in Argentina and across Latin America to study the documents of this protracted struggle and on that political foundation join the fight to build sections of the ICFI.

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