

# **New Argentine government shoots down protesting workers**

**Margaret Rees**  
**30 December 1999**

Within a week of taking office, the government of Argentina's newly-elected President Ferdinand De la Rúa quickly revealed its true face when paramilitary police shot dead two demonstrators and wounded 50 on December 17 in the provincial capital of the bankrupt Corrientes province.

One of the dead was a youth of 18, the other was a 26-year-old man. The director of the San Martín hospital, Julio Fidel, told Reuters that both died after being shot in the chest.

Protestors had lined the bridge connecting Corrientes with the neighbouring city of Resistencia to protest against unpaid wages for public servants, with arrears going back months, and the growing economic disaster in the drought-affected province. The demonstration blocked the bridge across the Paraná River, effectively halting trade with Brazil and Paraguay.

Protesters initially used T-shirts to protect their faces against tear gas, fired by up to 1,000 paramilitary police. Then protesters scattered as police fired at them. Federal officials claim that only rubber bullets were used. Local Corrientes police formed a line separating the demonstrators from the federal police. Corrientes governor Hugo Perie reportedly told local police to wave white flags.

Protesters denounced De la Rúa for sending the troops. "De la Rúa sent them to repress us. They are a bunch of cowards," one man told TV cameras. De la Rúa's government had dispatched the troops from Córdoba after announcing that it was taking over administrative control of the province.

The Confederation of Argentine Workers (CTA), covering all the country's public servants, called a 24-hour strike on December 20, demanding that the paramilitaries be removed. A CTA spokesman Víctor de Gennaro warned that the conflict might explode in

other provinces.

Recriminations are now flying between local officials and the national administration. Since October, the Argentinean Congress has been considering a bill to oust the local Corrientes administration and install a federal administrator for 180 days pending new elections.

The ongoing crisis in Corrientes proved a running sore for the previous Menem administration. Corrientes is one of the most poverty-stricken areas in the country. One in four of the inhabitants live on less than \$230 a month, and the infant mortality rate, at 22.8 per 1,000 births, is one of the highest in Argentina.

De la Rúa responded to the shootings by sending a federally-appointed auditor-general to Corrientes. Outgoing president Carlos Menem of the Peronist party and the Peronist governor of Buenos Aires province Carlos Ruckauf backed de la Rúa, the leader of the Alliance coalition. De la Rúa's choice for the job is Ramón Mestre, formerly governor of Córdoba province, a strong working class area.

Mestre will rule Corrientes with a handpicked cabinet and audit the provincial finances, which are in debt to the tune of 1,500 million pesos. His task is to refinance the debt, reduce the wages of state public servants and carry out downsizing. In the meantime, the federal government is sending 60 million pesos to try to calm the situation and pay some back wages owed to government workers. Mestre will make emergency payments to state employees, but the first of these will be accompanied by a census, in preparation for restructuring.

De la Rúa and Ruckauf met together to discuss their plans for Corrientes. Defending the federal intervention, Ruckauf declared that "it is obvious that violent groups participated in the conflict" and "those

groups are composed of violent professional provocateurs, whose aims surpass the genuine claims of the workers."

This official version of events is contested by De la Rua's vice president Carlos Chacho Alvarez, who is calling for an inquiry into the events that led to the shootings. The Alliance, an electoral bloc which won the October presidential election against the incumbent Peronist party, is composed of two wings—UCR and Frepaso. De la Rua is from UCR and Alvarez is head of the more populist Frepaso wing. Frepaso members have been restless about the government's actions, and wanted to dispatch their own delegations to Corrientes.

For much of this year, Corrientes has been a source of political instability. Large demonstrations in June and August over unpaid wages led to increasing turmoil. Two provincial governors were deposed in quick succession, and former Corrientes mayor Raul Romero Feris remains confined in a local medical centre, accused of embezzlement of payroll funds. The unrest has stopped trade in the province. Sales dropped to 30 percent and the Central Bank closed many accounts and rejected all cheques. Somewhere between 120 and 150 million pesos ceased circulating.

Authorities in Goya, a Correntino provincial centre where the local economy has been threatening collapse for months, have warned De la Rua that demonstrations are going to spread. "We fear that the actions that occurred in Corrientes capital will be repeated in our city," they wrote to De la Rua on December 20. They said the situation had been exacerbated by the austerity taxation package passed recently in the lower house of the national Congress, which they feared would cause the closure of all factories and escalate unemployment in the region.

The 2.6 billion-peso taxation package increases value-added taxes, and cuts 400 million pesos from provincial spending on social services. The Alliance government is committed to cutting spending to meet International Monetary Fund targets and has already frozen federal transfers to the provinces.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**