

General strike in Argentina

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A 36-hour general strike called by three union federations in Argentina virtually shut down the nation of 37 million inhabitants last week. The mass walkout was a protest against austerity measures by the De la Rúa administration that would cut Social Security benefits and freeze federal and provincial budgets for five years. President De la Rúa and Labor Minister Patricia Bullrich denounced the strike.

Last Friday, Argentina's industrial sector was totally paralyzed by the strike. Hundreds of women took to the streets banging their pots and government employees occupied the offices of the privatized Social Security system and blocked main roads in Buenos Aires. There were also incidents of right-wing violence. In Chaco province, a 23-year old unemployed worker was shot and killed on the picket line and another worker was wounded.

The strike was largely a response by the Peronist labor bureaucracy, which has endorsed the government's austerity measures, to the growing movement of the unemployed that for months has been blocking roads and organizing protests. The union officials called the strike in an effort to diffuse explosive social tensions. The few labor rallies that were called by the unions during the strike were largely boycotted by workers.

The strike followed a violent confrontation on November 22 in the industrial city of Córdoba. Police violently assaulted a labor rally in Argentina's second largest city after workers responded with sticks and stones to police efforts to dislodge them from the city hall. Six workers and six police officers were wounded after Córdoba Mayor German Kammerath ordered police to end the rally, which was called in preparation for the following day's general strike.

News of the clash was spread by radio and spontaneous marches of workers began to take place toward the center of town. At the same time, workers

took over the Urgent Care Hospital. Groups of arriving workers surrounded and stoned police, who responded with rubber bullets and tear gas. The clashes continued from morning to afternoon. Kammerath's order was defended by Córdoba's governor, José Manuel De la Sota, a member of the Peronist opposition party, who said, "Unions are here to defend the workers, not to replace governments."

De la Rúa's economic program is aimed at winning approval from the International Monetary Fund for a standby loan of \$20 billion to prevent Argentina from defaulting on next year's debt.



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