

# Police kill two protesters in Argentina

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28 June 2002

Two protesters were killed and 90 others injured in Buenos Aires Wednesday when police and national guardsmen attacked a demonstration of hundreds of jobless workers and retirees on the outskirts of the Argentine capital. Witnesses said heavily armed riot police fired from rooftops and at point blank range into crowds of protesters demanding jobs, food and aid for those hardest hit by the country's economic crisis.

The Argentine Workers Congress—the country's second-largest trade union federation, representing teachers and other public sector workers—called a one-day general strike Thursday to protest the government's violence and demand the resignation of President Eduardo Duhalde. Meanwhile, over 3,000 members of the federal police, the paramilitary units of Gendarmeria and other law enforcement agencies occupied the center of the capital to quell any additional protests.

The two victims murdered by the police—Maximiliano Costeki and Darío Santillán—were both in their early twenties. Hospital spokesmen said they died of gunshot wounds. Many of the others injured in the attack suffered head wounds after being struck by rubber bullets, tear gas canisters and other weapons. The police, who denied they used live ammunition, blamed other protesters for shooting the two young men.

“We don't want violence. But they are killing us with bullets. It's the only answer they have to our problems,” shouted a protester at Fiorito Hospital. A young worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “People are starving. People are desperate. They see no solution. What is going to happen to us? Repression is all we get.”

More than 173 people were arrested, including pregnant women, children and retirees. Riot police also broke up a demonstration outside the Congress in the city center. In addition, they raided the headquarters of the Communist Party and other leftist political

organizations, where, they said, rioters had taken refuge. The cops fired tear gas and bullets into the offices.

The police attack occurred on the Pueyrredon Bridge, which connects the capital to the southern industrial suburb of Avellaneda. In December, looting of supermarkets by hungry residents in the area sparked two days of nationwide protests and helped topple the government of Fernando de la Rúa and a second, interim, government after just one week in office. Twenty-seven people were killed during those protests.

Protesters chanting slogans against the government and the International Monetary Fund were reportedly preparing to blockade the bridge when the police launched the attack. The police continued to fire even as the protesters retreated to a railway station, where they attempted to load elderly pensioners on trains for their own protection.

Road blocks by “piqueteros” have occurred almost daily since the government devalued the peso in January and defaulted on its \$141 billion in public debt. Since then the value of the currency has fallen by 73 percent against the dollar and bank savings have been frozen. One out of four Argentines is out of work, pensioners have seen their benefits wiped out and nearly half the country's population of 36 million is living under the poverty line.

In recent days, the Duhalde government had signaled it was preparing to crack down on the protests and end “chaos.” Duhalde's cabinet chief, Alfredo Atanasof, warned that further traffic stoppages on highways and bridges would not be tolerated, saying, “This is the deepest crisis in Argentina's contemporary history and the country cannot stand more violence.”

The state attack at the Pueyrredon Bridge was prepared well in advance. An editorial in the daily newspaper *Página 12*, entitled “A previously announced massacre,” made this clear. The paper

wrote: “A national judge told *Pagina 12* reporter Miguel Bonasso 72 hours ago that ‘a violent repression against Puente Pueyrredon pickets’ was being planned. ‘Watch out,’ said the judge, ‘they are going to shoot.’ The judge had been informed by security personnel a few days previous. Bonasso tried to warn the organizers of the picket lines but is unaware if they got the message.”

The paper charged that the attack was a coordinated ambush by provincial police forces and the Gendarmeria Nacional, which recalled the brutal methods employed by the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina in the 1970s. Such an operation, the paper said, could not take place with judicial sanction. The paper also accused the police of seeking to destroy the evidence of their crime.

The government repression began as Economy Minister Roberto Lavagna began a three-day trip to the United States to meet with representatives of the International Monetary Fund and Wall Street banks in an effort to persuade them to reinstate an \$18 billion credit line suspended in December. The IMF withheld payments to Argentina because the government failed to impose deep enough austerity measures on the population in order to reduce its deficits.

Since January, Argentina’s reserves have dropped from \$13 billion to less than \$9.8 billion, with the government spending up to \$50 million a day to prevent a run on the peso, which fell to its lowest level on Tuesday. IMF officials have pressured the government to allow the peso to float, a measure that could produce hyperinflation.

There is little doubt that the IMF and banks like Citigroup—which hold large portions of the country’s debt—are demanding the Argentine government use whatever measures are necessary to guarantee its repayment, plus interest. With a July 15 deadline to repay \$1 billion or face another government default, the Duhalde government is hoping to demonstrate to Wall Street its willingness to use massive violence to crush popular opposition to the draconian measures being demanded by the banks.



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