

Argentina's police killings raise specter of dictatorship

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The execution-style murder of two unemployed youth during a jobless protest in Buenos Aires last Wednesday marks a new stage in Argentina's class struggle—raising once again the specter of military dictatorship.

Photographic and video evidence clearly shows that the deaths of Dario Santillan and Maximiliano Kosteki were not random events. Santillan in particular may have been singled out from an earlier confrontation. When an officer, accompanied by Avellaneda Police Chief Franchiotti, came upon him again, he was kneeling down at the Avellaneda train station, helping a wounded Kosteki.

A photo shows Santillan facing the officers, raising his right arm and saying, "Don't shoot, don't shoot." He then turned to flee. Police fatally shot him in the back at close range. Officers then dragged a dying Santillan to the sidewalk outside and placed Kosteki's body upside-down against a table, as a grotesque trophy. Autopsies revealed that multiple 9mm projectiles fired from police guns had killed both men. Neither protester was armed. The officers made no attempt at any time to call an ambulance for either youth.

Participating in the killings were both plainclothes agents of the Buenos Aires Provincial Police and of the *Prefectura Naval*, a semi-military unit that is charged with guarding Argentina's ports and waterways. Film of the demonstration and the shootings also exposed undercover agents who had infiltrated the ranks of the protesters. These agents provocateurs broke windows and carried out other acts of violence before turning on the other demonstrators, firing their weapons and making arrests.

Government authorities had prepared the political atmosphere for these attacks over the course of the previous weeks, warning that radical elements among the protesters were organizing an armed insurrection. Using the language of the 1976-83 military juntas, President Eduardo Duhalde's chief of staff, Alfredo Atanosof, repeatedly accused protesting organizations of fomenting "chaos" in Argentina.

These accusations were not entirely new. In January, the authorities attempted to justify repression against

unemployed workers' protests in northern Argentina with the wild accusations that Colombian guerrillas had infiltrated agents among the workers.

Since then there have been increasing declarations from government officials about the need for federal police reinforcements to help provincial police forces. On more than one occasion, the Army Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Brinzoni, indicated that the army was prepared to act against social rebellion or disorder. In February, Brinzoni held talks with Argentine business leaders telling them, "We will do whatever is necessary" to ensure order.

There are reports that leaders of the Justicialista Party (Peronist) are now lobbying the military for a coup d'état, either to install a military regime or to turn Duhalde into an "Argentine Fujimori," referring to the Peruvian leader who dissolved Congress and assumed dictatorial powers in 1993. Either variant would serve to enforce the policies of the International Monetary Fund on Argentine society.

One of those urging a "hard line" response to social protest was Argentina's foreign minister, Carlos Ruckauf, a veteran right-wing Peronist politician who in 1975 signed a decree authorizing the armed forces to participate in internal repression in order to "annihilate subversion." This decree was key in paving the way to military dictatorship.

Ominously, part of Wednesday's police repression involved kicking in the door of the Communist Party/ United Left offices in Avellaneda where police fired numerous rounds of rubber bullets at point-blank range, wounding several people inside. A number of other party members were arrested. The raid was carried out without any legal justification and recalled tactics associated with the junta's savage military repression.

Officials of the Duhalde government appear to have played a direct role in preparing the police killings. Three days before the assault, *Pagina 12* reporter Miguel Bonaso was told by a federal judge that violent repression was being prepared for the Puente Pueyrredon protest, and that the police would use live ammunition. This indicates that the massacre had been pre-approved by the government.

On last Wednesday's protest, as contingents of marchers approached Pueyrredon Bridge, a first line of provincial and federal police allowed them to pass through, effectively funneling the marchers toward the police line that attacked the march. Thus ambushed, the pickets were made to run a gauntlet of police firing teargas canisters and rubber bullets at close range.

This cat and mouse tactic was purposely designed to provoke, enrage and panic the unemployed. Protesters who fell or faltered were beaten and fired upon with live ammunition. As of Saturday, there had not been a full accounting of the wounded; a preliminary estimate put the toll at 90. Of the wounded pickets, two are listed in grave condition. Two pickets are listed as missing, never having returned home from Puente Pueyrredon

At least 170 of the protesters were arrested, including many of the wounded, and taken to the Avellaneda police headquarters where, according to witnesses, they were beaten and some were subjected to torture. The arrested included 52 women, seven of them pregnant, and 43 minors.

Initially the Buenos Aires Provincial Police and government authorities claimed no responsibility for the deaths, declaring that they had only fired rubber bullets. For a short while, the police continued to insist that they had thwarted an armed insurrection. According to that version it was the pickets themselves who had used lethal ammunition in an internecine dispute. But photographs appearing in Buenos Aires' dailies clearly show Santillan being executed.

When the first "official story" proved a lie, the government declared that a group of rogue cops carrying out a vendetta for their chief, Alberto Franchiotti, killed the youths. Franchiotti and three men under his command were arrested for the crime. On Sunday, that explanation unraveled as well amid eyewitness reports and press photographs showing that the bullets that killed Kosteki came from federal police forces, and not from Franchiotti's provincial police contingent. Videotapes also show undercover police firing on demonstrators.

These plainclothes units, known in the Argentine police vernacular as the *patotas*, or street thugs, are the direct descendants of the so-called "task forces" that were organized to kidnap, torture, murder and "disappear" opponents of the military dictatorship in the 1970s. Film of the confrontation also showed the plainclothes cops picking up their cartridges after firing, in an attempt to conceal evidence of the use of live ammunition.

Kosteki, 23, was an artist and a writer. He had studied ceramics, sculpture and printmaking. He was shot below the heart and died from his wounds. He had joined the Unemployed Workers Movement two months ago.

Santillan, 21, was a supporter of the Manuel Veron

Unemployed Coordinating Committee. He was also very active in his neighborhood, campaigning for the establishment of a brick cooperative to replace the neighborhood shanties with brick structures. His girlfriend, Claudia, will soon give birth to their child. Santillan was shot in the lower back; the shots perforated an artery. Like Kosteki, he bled to death.

The Duhalde administration's turn toward a new hard line against social protest is bound up with its negotiations with the International Monetary Fund. The government had signaled that it would not tolerate demonstrations that barricaded highways and bridges anymore, with the intention of proving to the IMF that it is capable of controlling popular opposition to its economic policies.

Argentina's depression is getting worse—in the first quarter of 2002, gross domestic product fell at an annual rate of over 16 percent. Last week central bank chairman Mario Blejer abruptly resigned, saying he was not going to preside over another round of hyperinflation, amidst predictions that the value of the peso is on the verge of plummeting to 7 or 8 per dollar, down from 1 per dollar in January.

It is hard to exaggerate what this economic debacle has meant for the Argentine working class. In little more than a year, the number of Argentines in poverty has doubled. Over 63 billion pesos in middle class savings have been lost. Major banks are on the verge of collapse and no end to the economic depression is in sight.

Disgusted by the killings, thousands of unemployed and their supporters marched on Argentina's presidential offices on June 27- 29 demanding the end of the Duhalde government.

Last Friday, columns of protesters came into the Plaza de Mayo from the industrial suburbs that surround this city of six million, challenging a massive police presence. The police arrested 30 demonstrators, claiming they were carrying sticks, stones and Molotov cocktails.

The marches capped a 24-hour national strike by public employees organized by the Argentine Workers Central (CTA), the smaller of Argentina's two labor federations.



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