

# Argentine workers stage hunger march

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Over 15,000 Argentine workers, unemployed and youth marched on the government palace in Buenos Aires's Plaza de Mayo December 4 in a "national march against hunger." The seven-hour march from the working class suburb of Liniers was organized by the *piqueteros* organizations (named for the picket lines they have used to block highways) that have sprung up in response to Argentina's protracted economic and social disintegration.

Marchers stopped at shopping centers and supermarkets along the route to ask for food donations. Organizers put forward a demand for over one million pounds of food to supply soup kitchens and child-feeding centers upon which more and more Argentines have been forced to depend.

While the Argentine interior minister had warned against possible looting resulting from the march, demonstrators made no attempt to seize food. Organizers of the *piqueteros* have charged that supporters of former president Carlos Menem, who is attempting to stage a comeback in elections scheduled for next year, are attempting to foment chaos, offering cash to people in poor neighborhoods to invade stores.

The march took place against the background of a mounting national tragedy of children starving to death in Argentina's poorer provinces. On the day of the protest, the press reported that a little girl aged two years and 10 months died as a result of malnutrition while being transferred to a hospital in the province of Corrientes. A doctor there explained that the child weighed "no more than 13 pounds, when the minimum for her age is 25 pounds." Another young victim of hunger was reported to have died in the province of Chaco on the same day.

Images of malnourished and dying children have become commonplace in the Argentine media. Recent studies have revealed that seven out of every ten Argentine children under age 14 now suffer from a

serious lack of food.

While the discovery of the fatal impact of child hunger by the media is fairly recent, social advocacy groups have been reporting the mounting death toll for some time. In a presentation made several months ago to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Argentine Center of Legal and Social Studies (CELS) documented more than 10,000 child deaths annually resulting from malnutrition and preventable causes stemming from poverty.

Commenting on the growing crisis, Argentina's Peronist president, Eduardo Duhalde, declared, "There's a surplus of food, but what is lacking is organization."

The first part of Duhalde's statement is no doubt true. Argentina possesses one of the most productive agricultural sectors of any country in the world, capable of producing more than enough food to supply a population 10 times its size. It is the fifth-largest exporter of agricultural goods and in an earlier epoch was known for having one of the highest per-capita rates of meat consumption internationally.

Hunger amid such plenty, however, is not a matter of a lack of organization, but rather an economy organized on the basis of definite policies—prescribed by the International Monetary Fund and dutifully implemented by a succession of governments over the past two decades. Foreign investors and a thin layer at the top of Argentine society have been enriched at the expense of the vast majority of the country's working population.

These policies—privatization of state enterprises, peso-dollar convertibility and endless rounds of fiscal austerity measures aimed at boosting "investor confidence"—drove the country's economy into deeper and deeper recession until the economic collapse and social explosion of a year ago that led to the country's default on foreign debt payments. What followed was a dizzying monetary devaluation that cut the value of the

peso by two thirds while increasing the cost of basic necessities by a roughly equal amount.

Now, the official unemployment rate tops 25 percent and more than half of the country's population lives below the poverty line. Some six million have joined the ranks of the poor within the last year alone.

Over the last year, it is estimated that the poorest 10 percent of the population have lost \$630 million in income. As a share of the gross domestic product, the income of this oppressed layer of Argentine society fell from 2.3 percent to 1.1 percent between 1989—when the government of Carlos Menem launched the policy of wholesale privatization and related “free market” policies aimed at attracting foreign direct investment—and 2002.

According to a study by the social research group Equis, the gap between wealth and poverty has widened steadily over the past quarter of a century since the coming to power of the US-backed military dictatorship, and especially over the past decade. While in 1975 the wealthiest 10 percent of the population received eight times the income of the poorest 10 percent, that gap widened to 15 times by 1989. By last year, those at the top of the social pyramid were pulling in 34 times the amount received by those at the bottom. During the same period, all but the top 10 percent have seen their incomes plummet.

Meanwhile, the government earlier this week lifted its freeze on peso-denominated savings accounts, allowing depositors to freely withdraw funds for the first time since December of last year. When the freeze went into effect, the 21 billion pesos in the deposits were worth \$21 billion on the basis of one-to-one convertibility. Convertibility was abandoned after the freeze was imposed, however, and the resulting devaluation reduced the value of these accounts to less than \$6 billion.

The freeze, known as the “corralito,” was carried out by the government of President Fernando de la Rúa, who described it as a temporary measure aimed at stemming capital flight and maintaining currency reserves. It helped trigger nationwide protests that left over 30 people dead and forced de la Rúa to flee the presidential palace.

The vast robbery of Argentina's middle class accomplished through the freeze came only after foreign banks and investors, as well as the local

financial elite, were allowed to illegally ship truckloads of dollars out of the country. A recent study by the Federal Administration for Public Income found that 1,500 of Argentina's wealthiest transferred more than \$3 billion out of the country in 2001, many of them without ever declaring it. The figures were incomplete, as only 58 of the 100 banks operating in Argentina agreed to provide information on the transfers.

Duhalde has lifted the deposit freeze as part of an attempt to reach an agreement with the IMF for new loans so the country can meet payments on past debts to it and other international lending agencies. In return, however, the IMF is demanding yet another round of austerity policies, including mass foreclosures on unpaid mortgages, sharp increases in utility rates and further cuts in social spending—all measures that will only deepen Argentina's depression and increase hunger and poverty.



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