

Violent clashes in Buenos Aires on eve of election

Argentine police attack workers protest

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Just days before Argentina's presidential election, Buenos Aires was rocked by violence Monday as heavily armed police attacked a demonstration led by women textile workers. The workers were attempting to reclaim their jobs at a factory they had occupied and run since December 2001. More than 125 people were arrested and scores more injured by police, who, in addition to tear gas and rubber bullets, fired live ammunition at the workers.

What amounted to a police riot raged across nearly 30 blocks of the Argentine capital well into the night as the cops pursued the demonstrators. At one point, the police invaded a children's hospital where some of the injured protesters had sought refuge, firing tear gas canisters that sickened both patients and medical staff.

The confrontation had been building since the early morning hours last Friday, when police violently evicted the textile workers from the Brukman factory. It was the third attempt to carry out the eviction since workers took over the plant 16 months ago. This time, over 200 riot police entered the building, expelling the workers.

The cops were sent to enforce a court order issued following a ruling by two appeals judges, both judicial veterans of the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983. The ruling was issued to return the factory to the owners who had closed it and prevent the workers from trying to resume production. It included the chilling phrase: "There is no supremacy of life or physical integrity over economic interests." For the police, this amounted to a license to kill.

On Monday, following two days of rallies and picketing, the workers marched on the plant at the head of a mass protest of 7,000 supporters. Over 500 police wearing riot gear and backed by armored cars were waiting for them, having ringed the factory with

barricades.

Police commanders on the scene refused to negotiate with the leaders of the demonstration, insisting they would enforce the court order and prevent anyone from entering the factory. At about 5:30 p.m., demonstrators toppled one of the barricades, and four women, Brukman workers dressed in their light-blue work smocks, ran toward the factory door.

This seemingly harmless gesture triggered a massive assault by the police, who filled the streets with choking tear gas and fired on the crowd. While the authorities claimed that the cops were using rubber bullets, demonstrators later showed reporters spent cartridges from lethal ammunition.

The four workers who managed to breach the barricade were the first targets of the attack, but were defended by media cameramen who were inside the police lines and shielded them until they could escape.

The thousands of demonstrators fled the scene, but fought running battles with the police, throwing rocks and, in a few cases, Molotov cocktails. A few blocks from the factory, a crowd of demonstrators encountered a car with two plainclothes police in it. After forcing the occupants to flee, they torched the vehicle.

Police continued to chase down fleeing demonstrators many blocks from the factory site. In a number of cases, protesters were thrown to the ground, beaten and kicked before being hauled away.

Among those arrested were four workers from the occupied Zanon ceramics factory, who had come from the province of Neuquén to support the Brukman workers. Also rounded up were politicians and journalists who had joined the march, including Marcelo Parrili, the vice-presidential candidate of the Izquierda Unida coalition, and Miguel Bonasso, who writes for the left-wing daily *Pagina 12*.

Some of the workers and their supporters regrouped at the Argentine Congress building, which they attempted to enter in order to hold a press conference. Police barred them, even though the group included some legislators.

Outside the building the workers spoke to the media. “They are afraid of us because we demonstrated that if we can run the factory, we can run the country,” Celia Martinez, one of the leaders of the Brukman occupation, told the press. “We put our bodies, our lives on the line, and for that we have to return; we are not going to give up the factory.”

While several government officials later issued public statements lamenting the violent repression, all of them insisted that they were powerless to intervene in the face of the court’s ruling.

The Brukman workers occupied the plant after its owners shut it down when they were unable to pay salaries and meet debt payments in the midst of Argentina’s economic free-fall. It is one of over 100 closed factories and other businesses that have been similarly reopened by their workforces across Argentina, where the official unemployment rate now stands at over 20 percent.

The explosion of police violence at Brukman came in the midst of the final round of campaigning in presidential elections set for April 27. There were widespread suspicions in Argentina that the police action may have part of a deliberate campaign of destabilization involving security forces and political elements bent on bringing to power a right-wing government committed to suppressing popular unrest.

None of the candidates in Sunday’s election are expected to receive anywhere near a majority of the vote from an electorate that is deeply skeptical, if not openly hostile, toward all those running for president. Among those projected as front-runners is ex-president Carlos Menem, whose policies of sweeping privatizations and dollar-to-peso convertibility are widely blamed for the economic catastrophe that has beset the country. Nearly 60 percent of the population—double the number of barely a year ago—now live below the poverty line, attempting to survive on incomes of under \$250 a month.

Menem has pledged to rule with an “iron hand,” proposing to use the armed forces to police the streets. Presenting himself as the only figure capable of

rescuing Argentina from social chaos, he and his supporters have been accused of fomenting street violence and looting in an attempt to boost his political fortunes.

The country’s last elected president, Fernando de la Rúa, was extracted from the presidential palace by helicopter amidst the mass upheavals that accompanied the country’s financial crisis. The office was then held by four individuals selected by the national legislature in the space of two weeks, the last being Argentina’s present caretaker president, Eduardo Duhalde.

Besides Menem, another four candidates are considered possible contenders for a spot in a two-candidate runoff scheduled for May 18. These include two Peronists: Santa Cruz provincial Governor Néstor Kirchner, who is backed by Duhalde; and San Luis provincial Governor Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, who was president for a week during the 2001 crisis.

There are also two former members of the Radical Party of de la Rúa: Elisa Carrió, a member of the House of Deputies from Chaco who formed a party called Alternative for a Republic of Equals; and Ricardo López Murphy, a University of Chicago-trained economist, who was forced to resign as de la Rúa’s economy minister after failing to push through a drastic austerity program.

Argentine voters are required by law to go to the polls, but in the October 2001 midterm elections nearly 40 percent cast spoiled or blank ballots. Popular hostility toward the entire political establishment has not diminished, and some political analysts are predicting a similar protest vote on Sunday.



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