

Police killing of teacher provokes national strike in Argentina

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Teachers throughout Argentina staged a nationwide strike Monday to protest the cold-blooded police murder on April 4 of one of their colleagues, Carlos Fuentealba, during a protest in the southwestern province of Neuquén, approximately 600 miles from the capital of Buenos Aires.

The strike was accompanied by a demonstration that saw some 50,000 march from the Obelisk in downtown Buenos Aires to the Neuquén government house. Marchers carried placards bearing Fuentealba and the slogan “Nunca Mas” (Never Again), referring to the fierce repression unleashed against the Argentine working class under the military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1976-1983.

A demonstration in Neuquén itself brought out another 30,000 people, and similar protests were held throughout the country.

Carlos Fuentealba was killed during a protest by teachers in the city of Neuquén, the provincial capital, who sought to block a road to press their demand for higher salaries. Provincial riot police attacked the demonstrators. Fuentealba’s death was caused by a tear gas grenade fired intentionally at his head, smashing his skull and causing a severe loss of blood. He died hours after the attack at a local hospital.

Police Sergeant Dario Poblete fired the projectile at the Fuentealba, who was still in his car with other teachers preparing to join the protest, from a distance of barely six feet.

Poblete had previously been sentenced to two years in jail for corruption. Despite the conviction, he was kept on the police force after his sentence was overturned by a higher court.

The murder of the teacher took place in the midst of rising class tensions in Argentina, where the recovery from the economic crisis of 2001-2003 has been

accompanied by record levels of economic inequality, persistent joblessness and rising inflation.

The killing has called into question not only the violent and repressive measures employed by the Argentine police to confront questions of a social character, but the political system in Argentina as a whole. Almost before the slain teacher’s body was cold, the incident had touched off a series of charges and counter-charges between principal candidates for president and for governor in elections set for June.

The governor of Neuquén, Jorge Sobisch, who has announced his candidacy for president on the platform of the right-wing Movement of the United Provinces, accused Daniel Firmus, the minister of education, along with President Néstor Kirchner, of bearing political responsibility for the death of the teacher. Sobisch’s reasoning was that by decreeing that teachers starting salaries should be raised from 840 to 1,040 pesos without previously consulting with the provincial governments, they had created the conditions for confrontation.

In Argentina, teachers’ salaries are paid by the provinces, but Firmus, who is both minister of education and a candidate for mayor of Buenos Aires, was able to get a law approved obliging the provinces to raise teachers’ pay. Sobisch, a political opponent of Kirchner, dared not to implement the pay hike, and confronted the anger of the teachers in the streets.

For his part, Kirchner clearly alluded to Sobisch in a statement Monday, declaring, “Some people want to recreate the Security Doctrine [imposed by the former military dictatorship to justify mass repression] and believe that to be a good statesman, you have to have a stick in your hand.”

Sobisch had accused Kirchner of “cowardice” and freely acknowledged giving the order to repress the

teachers. “I would take the same decision again to enforce the constitution and the law,” he said. “If those who are intolerant and want anarchy are going to come and give orders in Argentina, then we will not have a good future.”

The cowardly state murder of Carlos Fuentealba has exposed not only the cynicism of the Argentine bourgeoisie, but also the opportunism of the country’s bureaucratized trade unions. The union leaders have taken advantage of the crisis to attempt to boost their political influence in the Kirchner government—which suffered a serious blow last year as a result of the pitched battle waged between the rival CGT and CTA federations at a ceremonial reburial of Perón staged in Santa Fé. In response to the killing, the union bureaucrats called only minimal symbolic protest actions—two-hour lunchtime strikes by transport workers and a few other sectors.

The killing has also thrown into sharp relief the political form of bourgeois rule exercised in Argentina in recent years. Under the military dictatorship that gave up power nearly 24 years ago, Argentina’s dominant ruling sectors guaranteed stability by means of open terror and state violence above all against the workers, but also in relation to all forms of political opposition. With the end of the military regime, the Peronist opposition (based on a mixture of bourgeois nationalism and corrupt trade unionism) eventually came to power by means of popular elections.

By 2003, after the popular rebellions and the violent economic crisis that led to the ouster from power of President Fernando de la Rúa and his Economy Minister Domingo Cavallo, “left” Peronism came to power with the election of Kirchner as president.

Once in power, Kirchner sought to rule by promoting the interests of foreign and Argentine capital, while seeking to co-opt a section of the social protest movements and exploit the ability of the Peronist bureaucracy to contain the explosive struggles of the Argentine working class.

During his visit to New York last September—where he was invited to ring the bell at Wall Street’s stock exchange—Kirchner defended what he termed his “heterodox economic policy, within the canon of classic economics.”

The police murder of Carlos Fuentealba, a poorly paid high school teacher fighting for better conditions,

and the rising militancy of the Argentine working class as a whole are rapidly exposing the bankruptcy of Kirchner’s attempts to bridge Argentina’s gaping class divide.



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