

Top Argentine union leader arrested in murder of left-wing worker

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Jose Pedraza, the president of Argentina's Railway Union (Unión Ferroviaria-UF), one of the pillars of the Peronist union bureaucracy, was arrested Tuesday for the murder of Mariano Ferreyra, a left-wing worker, during a goon squad attack last October.

Pedraza was brought into court in handcuffs on the orders of Judge Susana Wilma López. Also arrested was the union's number-two official, Juan Carlos "Gallego" Fernández. Both men were subjected to hours of questioning on their role in organizing the violent attack that left Ferreyra, a member of the Partido Obrero (Workers Party), dead and three other workers seriously wounded.

The arrests were met with a partial strike ordered by the railway union, which succeeded in shutting down service on the Roca rail line in the east and southeast of Buenos Aires. Emergency buses were brought in to minimize the disruption. Significantly, many rail facilities failed to heed the union bureaucracy's call for a walkout.

Following the judge's decision Wednesday to deny an appeal for Pedraza and Fernández to be released pending trial, the rail union bureaucracy issued a call for a job action "to paralyze the transport services" between midnight and noon on February 25.

The arrests follow widespread protests over the brutal killing of the young militant worker, and damning revelations of the intimate ties between his killers, the organizers of the attack in the union bureaucracy, and top officials in the ruling Peronist party and the government of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

The killing last October was part of a goon squad attack organized by the union bureaucracy against "outsourced" railway workers protesting layoffs and demanding their rights to permanent employment and

parity with their counterparts working directly for the railways.

Those who carried out the attack included lower-level union functionaries, as well as thugs contracted to do such dirty work for the UF. Seven of members of the goon squad, known as a *patota* in Spanish, were arrested in the wake of the killing. One of them, Cristian Favale, has been accused of pulling the trigger.

Favale, recruited from the "Defense and Justice" soccer fan club, was known as a *barrabrava* or football hooligan. His Facebook page included photographs taken with leading members of the government, including Economics Minister Amado Bodou and Education Minister Alberto Sileoni.

Supporters of the Peronist faction loyal to Fernández de Kirchner and her late husband and former president Néstor Kirchner have attempted to emphasize Favale's ties to Alberto Trezza, who held the post of sub-secretary of rail transport under former Argentine president Eduardo Duhalde, a political rival of the Kirchners.

Arrested Tuesday together with the two top union officials was a UF delegate, Claudio Alcorcel, who served as the go-between with Favale, who led his own gang of thugs. Their only connection to the union was of a mercenary character.

Those who participated in the murderous violence had reportedly been offered cash, better employment or jobs for their family members.

While the incident and the arrests have created a crisis within Peronism and deepened political divisions, they have more fundamentally underscored the completely reactionary character of the Peronist union federation. It represents not the interests of the Argentine workers, but rather a wealthy layer of mafia-style bureaucrats, who have themselves become

employers and labor contractors.

It marks a further degeneration of a labor bureaucracy that has a long record of betrayal of the Argentine working class. This includes its subordination of workers' interests to the bourgeois nationalist movement founded by General Juan Perón, its intimate involvement in the formation of the first death squads that murdered thousands of militant workers in the 1970s, and its enforcement of the privatizations and austerity measures imposed at the behest of the IMF and international finance capital.

Much of the questioning of the union boss, Pedraza, related to the motive for the fatal attack and centered on an agency known as the Mercosur Cooperative Workers Union. Pedraza, a millionaire who lives in the luxury district of Puerto Madero on the Rio de la Plata, admitted a relationship to the Mercosur group as well as to other so-called cooperatives. He claimed that they were formed as a means of providing work to those who could not otherwise have gained employment on the railways.

The reality is that these "cooperatives" were established in the aftermath of the sweeping privatization of government services carried out in the 1990s, which included the outsourcing of major portions of railway employment, including such tasks as maintenance and cleaning. Those employed in these jobs have been paid as little as 30 percent of what they would have made before the outsourcing, are denied vacations and basic benefits and have no job security, subject to firing at will.

In the case of Mercosur, police raids on the rail union headquarters and on Pedraza's residence uncovered evidence that made it clear that the agency was run by the union president for his own profit, a reward for his collaboration in the privatization drive 20 years ago. His son had an office in Mercosur headquarters. The union's public relations director, who presumably drafted the public statement denouncing Pedraza's arrest as an attack on the unions and calling for strike action, was listed as the firm's president.

Thus, the motive for the crime couldn't have been clearer. Ferreyra and the other workers who were fighting for the rights that the rail union was ostensibly created to defend were threatening the profits reaped by the union's chief from their near slave-labor condition. They therefore had to be violently suppressed.

The prosecutor in the case, Fernando Fiszer, charged that Pedraza and his cohorts "instigated and organized" the thugs who attacked the demonstrating contract workers with rocks, clubs and gunfire.

Among the damning evidence produced against the UF bureaucrats were cell phone records that made it clear the chief union delegate at the scene, Pablo Díaz, was in more or less permanent discussion with Fernández, who was sitting with Pedraza at the union headquarters as the attack was carried out. Wiretaps have also exposed attempts by the top union officials to obstruct the investigation into the killing and secure the release of arrested goon squad members.

The Argentine prosecutor has also sought indictments against five members of the Federal Police in connection with the fatal violence. Witnesses have testified that the police acted to facilitate the attack, taking no action against the gunmen who killed Ferreyra, while firing rubber bullets at the besieged protesters. The cops, the prosecutor charged, acted to ensure that the killers could act with "impunity."

The leadership of the Partido Obrero warned that arrests of the union officials responsible for Mariano Ferreyra's murder could prove a fleeting victory. Pressure from the "apparatus of the union bureaucracy," it warned, could lead to their release, just as it did earlier this month in the case of Geronimo Venegas, the secretary general of the Argentina Union of Rural Workers and Stevedores (UATRE) and a top Peronist labor bureaucrat.

Venegas was charged in the so-called drug tampering scandal, which has implicated him and other union officials in a profit-making scam that involved the distribution of adulterated medicines, including to their own members. Fifteen months earlier, the president of the Argentine bank workers union, Juan José Zanola, was arrested together with his wife on similar charges. Venegas's arrest prompted a series of protests and a denunciation by the CGT, after which he was quietly released.



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