

Popular protests sparked by deadly train accident in Argentina

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The discovery of the 51st victim of the wreck of train 3732 on the Sarmiento line in the city of Buenos Aires, a young man who had been missing for two days, resulted in angry protests on Friday, February 24. Riot squads fired tear gas at the protesters, who burned cardboard and threw rocks at the police. Police arrested some of the demonstrators.

The confrontation took place on the day that rescuers found the body of Lucas Menghini Rey, a 20-year-old telephone operator, who was the father of a 4-year-old child. Menghini was found between two cars of a train that had crashed into a wall on February 22. The young worker was identified from documents that he had in a backpack. Lucas's mother, María Luján Rey, had been looking for him in hospitals and morgues, posting flyers with young man's photo, insisting that he had been in the train.

The protests were sparked in large part by the fact that the administration of President Cristina Fernandez had ignored warnings that the obsolete urban transit system was becoming inoperable. It was an open secret that the rail system was in the hands of incompetent and corrupt administrators.

The Once tragedy sheds light on the risk that Buenos Aires rail commuters face every day, caused by the deplorable conditions of Argentina's urban rail network.

The train, carrying 1,500 people, slammed into hydraulic bumpers at the end of the track at the Once Station, near downtown Buenos Aires. The bumpers are designed to buffer low-speed impacts. In addition to the passengers who lost their lives, 703 others were injured. Among them was Marcos Antonio Córdoba, the train operator. This is the third-worst rail tragedy in Argentine history. Last September, a train along the same line slammed into a bus, killing 11 people. The immediate cause of that accident was a crossing barrier's failure to operate.

This accident happened as commuters were traveling to their jobs. Riding in the first two or three cars in the eight car train was a crush load—it was impossible to fit any more passengers in; hundreds were standing in the aisles as the train approached its final destination.

The train operator, Córdoba, 28, reported that the brakes failed as the train entered the station, causing the lead car to slam into the bumpers, the second car to slam into it, and the

second and third cars to climb over the lead car. Rescue workers had to cut through the roof to take out many of the victims. The accident took place at 8:23 a.m.

Insisting that brake failures are virtually impossible in these trains, *Transportes de Buenos Aires* (TBA,) the for-profit concessionaire that manages the line, blamed the disaster on train operator Córdoba. While in the hospital, Córdoba, who passed a sobriety test administered soon after the tragedy, was kept under guard and is being charged with "mayhem." Under Argentine law, such a charge is applied to those whose negligence was unintentional.

The train was on one of seven electrified surface rail lines that link the working class cities of Greater Buenos Aires with this sprawling capital of 6 million people. Its destination was the Once train station, near downtown Buenos Aires. Hundreds of the rail cars operated by TBA on its two rail lines, Sarmiento and Mitre, are aging and poorly maintained. The cars involved in the tragedy, manufactured by Toshiba, had been in operation since 1965.

Echoing the TBA line, initial media reports speculated that Córdoba might have been using his cell phone when the train struck the wall. Transportation Minister Juan Pablo Schiavi fully supported TBA's suggestion that the train operator had been at fault. As evidence, he pointed out that the train had managed to make all its previous stops.

He also described how, as it approached its final destination, the train slowed down normally on its last 1,000 meters, from 47 to 39 to 26 kilometers an hour. It entered Once Station at 26 kilometers and continued to slow down. It was moving at 20 kilometers an hour 40 meters before the wall at the end of the station. "We do not know what happened in the last 40 meters," declared Schiavi. In fact, Schiavi had no proof of anything he was saying; undoubtedly he was merely reading from the TBA's script.

However, many passengers interviewed by the official news agency *Telam* said that throughout its run the 47-year-old train had not been stopping properly that morning.

Even if the TBA were right, the Toshiba trains were equipped with brake systems that, when working properly, were designed to safely stop a train. In addition to its normal brake equipment, urban trains have long been equipped with electro-mechanical

emergency brake systems that are designed to operate and safely stop a train in the event of brake failure, or in the event of incapacity by the train operator.

The manner in which this accident happened, with the train slamming into the wall of the station, points to a catastrophic failure of the emergency brake system, which should have operated even in the event of train operator distraction or negligence. A video from the platform suggests that the emergency brake did operate in the first car but failed to operate in the cars that followed, suggesting that the electric signal that connects the emergency brake valves in each car to each other was inoperable.

Furthermore, the second and third cars appeared to have both jumped six meters (18 feet). The third car ended up partially atop the second car. In turn, the second car also partially climbed onto the lead car. The second car was destroyed. This fact also indicates that the anti-climbing equipment with which each car is equipped was either faulty or missing.

In addition to this deadly combination of aging equipment and brake and structural failures is the state of the tracks. Suffering from decades of deferred maintenance, when combined with the excessive number of passengers in the front cars, they multiplied the train's normal stopping distance.

Many of the passengers were standing in the spaces between cars. The region's high summer heat and high humidity forces passenger cars, which have no air conditioning, to operate with open end-doors.

The Argentine rail network was built in the nineteenth century by British capital as a means of transporting that nation's agricultural goods for export through Atlantic ports. Then-president Juan Domingo Perón nationalized the rail system in 1947, with very generous compensation to its owners.

What followed was a downhill slide of both passenger and cargo service, which coincided with the decay of the Argentine economy in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

With the pretext that the country faced an economic emergency, the railroads were reprivatized in the 1990s at fire sale prices under President Saúl Menem. Furthermore, the Menem administration argued that, given the state of the economy, "formal" procedures had to be set aside. There was simply no time to assess the value of these companies.

Consequently, all the state-owned monopolies, rail, oil, airlines, utilities, etc., were liquidated at a fraction of their value, and on the basis of fraudulent agreements whose only purpose was to generate windfall profits through downsizing, price and fare increases, and government handouts.

While the railroads were not privatized outright, their operation was outsourced to capitalist concessionaires; this proved to be a constant drain of state funds in the form of subsidies that guaranteed profits. There was no accountability, except to toothless regulators such as the National Transportation Regulation Commission, which was charged with the regulation of the quality of rail service. As such, it

bears major responsibility for last week's tragedy.

None of the privatizations would have been possible without the active collaboration of the Argentine trade unions. In return for a "piece of the action," the trade unions became agencies of companies such as TBA, Repsol-YPF, and many others, facilitating the sacking of tens of thousands of so-called redundant workers and the destruction of working conditions and living standards. One of the urban lines is managed directly by one of the rail unions (Unión Ferroviaria) in return for part of the \$900 million that the government hands out to rail operators each year.

The governments that succeeded Menem all continued with his destructive neo-liberal legacy, including the current administration of Cristina Fernandez. All have favored monopolies like TBA, which controls most bus service and about one third of rail service into Buenos Aires, continuing to subsidize them.

Within a few years of privatization, what had been the most efficient and extensive railroad network in Latin America had all but collapsed. Services, essential to many communities but considered unprofitable to their new owners were cancelled. Thousands of miles of tracks were ripped from the ground and sold for their value as scrap. Costly truck and bus transportation replaced rail transportation. On average, the movement of commodities by rail is half the cost of truck transport.

The peso crisis and the severe economic crisis of 2001 accelerated this process. The rail companies, close to bankruptcy, obtained substantial subsidies from the administration of President Nestor Kirchner. In this they were aided by a long tradition of political corruption and the corporatist unions.

Currently, 12,000 workers are employed in the entire rail network, down from 300,000 in 1947. Seven thousand kilometers of passenger rail are all that is left of the 50,000 kilometers that existed when rail was nationalized in 1947. Also lost were 3,000 locomotives, 1,600 passenger stations, 40 maintenance shops and some 60,000 railroad-owned properties.

On Monday, five days after the accident, as popular outrage continued to build, President Fernandez announced that the government would launch an investigation of the TBA, taking it over until the investigation is complete



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