

Following social unrest, Argentine government grants police wage hikes

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Following a wave of protests and strikes, and in an attempt to stave off social unrest, Argentine governors agreed to substantial raises for provincial police. The protests had begun in the province of Córdoba on December 3 and quickly extended to other Argentine provinces. They ended on December 9.

The following day, Argentina observed the 30th anniversary of the return of civilian rule following the end of the military regime that ruled between 1976 and 1983.

The elected governments since 1983 have alternated between various factions of the Radical Party and of Peronism. The three decades since the ignominious collapse of the dictatorship have been marked by one economic and political crisis after another.

The last 11 years, under the stewardship of the late president Nestor Kirchner and his widow, current President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, began with a currency crisis and a social explosion and the collapse of the Fernando de la Rúa government at the end of 2001, followed by the brief appointed presidency of Eduardo Duhalde.

President de la Rúa had relied on the police to savagely repress the wave of supermarket looting in Buenos Aires and the massive demonstrations of December 19 and December 20 of that year. During those two days, police killed 39 protesters.

This is the outcome that the Argentine ruling establishment was trying to prevent when earlier this month it caved in to police demands for higher wages. On December 3, police in the central province of Córdoba warehoused themselves in their stations, and their action was followed by similar protests in other provinces. Given the desperate state of many Argentine families, 27 percent of whom exist below the poverty line, the police were counting on what happened next:

looting of supermarkets and other stores. Twelve people died, and scores were injured.

Provincial governments quickly agreed to the police demands, with the federal government left to bail out the cash-strapped governors. Córdoba police received a 100 percent increase.

The government of president Fernandez de Kirchner seized on the nature of some of the looting, involving youths on motorcycles brandishing weapons, to suggest that the events had not been spontaneous, but rather were part of a coordinated operation by police and their allies in organized crime to destabilize the government.

“I am not naïve,” declared Fernandez at the December 10 commemoration, “I do not believe in coincidences.” The president went on to charge that all of the looting had been pre-planned. For his part, investigative reporter Tomás Méndez, who in September had helped uncover links between the Córdoba police and organized crime, voiced his suspicions that police were trying to make up for the drying up of bribe money; “the cash box is closed,” said Méndez.

In a preemptive move, Buenos Aires police (who had not joined in the protests) received a 90 percent raise, lest they also walk off their jobs. The fear was that the inhabitants of shantytowns (*villas miserias*—misery villages) that surround this capital city would join in the looting, sparking a repeat of the social explosion of December 2001.

The Argentine ruling class is right to worry. The country has become a tinderbox. Conditions for the Argentine working class today approximate those of 2001. Many are worse off than they were then. In Argentina, as in Greece, Spain and elsewhere, the more social tensions rise, the more governments rely on the police as an occupation force in working class

neighborhoods, veritable guard dogs for the bourgeoisie.

On November 16, the Coordinating Committee against Police and Institutional Repression (CORREPI), a Buenos Aires human rights watchdog organization, issued a report indicating that police have assassinated 4,011 people in the last three decades. The statistics indicate that the pace of killings has accelerated since 2001 to about 200 per year. As of last year, 213 people abducted by police are still missing. The report also reports on scores of victims of police torture. CORREPI uses the term *gatillo fácil* (easy trigger) to describe the casual use of firearms by police, particularly against the youth, crimes that mostly go unpunished.

The latest such killing took place on Christmas Eve, when a 40-year-old worker was shot in cold blood by an off duty police officer. The victim was part of a protest against rolling electricity blackouts in the middle-class Flores neighborhood of Buenos Aires.

The Kirchner wing of the Peronist movement took power in 2002, promising to end the unrestrained free market “modelo” of Menem and De la Rúa and replace it with so-called “serious capitalism.” The changes proved to be largely cosmetic. The “modelo” continues, as it did prior to 2003, subordinating the needs of the working and middle classes to the profits of privately owned industries and banks.

Twelve years after the 2001 protests, fully half of the workers in the private sector are employed informally: part time, or as contract workers. They are exploited through “junk contracts,” fraudulent work cooperatives and precarious employment schemes. Such “labor flexibility” is now making its way into the public sector. Roughly 50 percent of the working class households earn less than the basic minimum of 7,000 pesos for a family of four; an increasing number earn less than the national minimum wage.

Struggles over wages and working conditions have been constrained by the “paritaria” system (negotiated between the trade union bureaucracy, the government and employers), effectively eliminating strikes. In combination with income taxes and cuts in social programs for the vast majority, wages are being devastated by the country’s high inflation rates.

At the same time, prices for basic necessities skyrocketed this year. The price of bread rose by 133

percent; noodles went up by 75 percent; maté tea rose by 70 percent. Prices also shot up for virtually every supermarket item, including milk (30 percent), chicken (36 percent), beef (40 percent). In all, supermarket prices are 33.2 percent higher than they were in January 2013. The impact on poor households, which depend on refined wheat flour products was even higher, the equivalent of an increase of between 40 and 50 percent.

These economic conditions make a social explosion inevitable.



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