General strike in Argentina

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A 24-hour general strike in Argentina on Thursday April 10 was a powerful demonstration of working class opposition to the austerity policies of the government of President Cristina Fernandez Kirchner (CFK).

The degree of participation in this 24-hour work stoppage reflects an anger that has been building up for years of declining living standards, informal employment, attacks on working conditions and the destruction of jobs.

Three of the five trade union federations participated in the strike call, including factions of a divided General Confederation of Labor (*Confederación General del Trabajo*, CGT) supported by one wing of the Argentine Workers' Federation (*Confederación de Trabajadores Argentinos*, CTA).

The strike was called on April 3 by the CGT *Azul y Blanco*, headed by Luis Barrionuevo, the CGT *Azopardo*, headed by Luis Moyano and the opposition CTA, headed by Pablo Micheli. The CGT *Oficial*, headed by Antonio Caló, together with a faction of the CTA, denounced the strike call, claiming that it would benefit the right wing.

The general strike call took place when it became clear that the teachers, who had been striking and mobilizing over the previous three weeks, were returning to their classes. Their struggle was left isolated by all of the CGT and CTA factions.

Significantly, the trade union bureaucracy eschewed mobilizing the ranks in marches or rallies, exposing the union leadership's fear of sparking a working class explosion. In the words of an observer, it looked like a Sunday in Buenos Aires.

The parties of the pseudo-left *Frente de Izquierda* (Left Front) mobilized their supporters in picket lines blocking roads, highways and bridges in Buenos Aires and other cities, but they too declined to organize any mass rallies in downtown Buenos Aires or other major cities.

The strike paralyzed Buenos Aires and its metropolitan area. It was also widely observed across Argentina. In the auto production center of Córdoba, where the auto union SMATA repudiated the strike, most autoworkers participated in the work stoppage. Similarly in Buenos Aires province, most workers at the Ford, Volkswagen and Lear plants joined the walkout.

The strike was a protest against the rampant inflation and government austerity policies that are destroying working class living standards.

In addition, the trade unions are demanding that the government continue funding health benefits at their current levels. These benefits, known as *Obras Sociales*, are managed by the union bureaucracy and have become a major source of lucrative income for this layer.

The teachers' strikes that in Buenos Aires resulted in wage increases that are already falling behind a monthly inflation rate of more than 2.5 percent in consumer market prices. The rising inflation, together with cuts in consumer subsidies for natural gas, water and electricity, will undoubtedly deepen the fall into poverty of many households in this South American nation of 40 million.

Inflation is now 32 percent and rising as the value of the peso continues to fall in the world market.

The strike was most powerful in the transportation sector. Across the country, virtually all transportation services were at a standstill, including air travel and many taxis.

Cabinet chief Jorge Capitanich denounced the pickets and suggested that the strike was really a lockout by private transit operators. Consequently, the CFK administration ordered a one-day suspension of subsidies for transportation firms.

Capitanich also made the dubious claim that the success of the national walkout was due to the fact that workers, lacking transportation to go to their jobs, were forced to stay home.

Regardless, Central Bank officials and the Ministry of Economics have made it clear that they will continue austerity fiscal measures and a severely restrictive monetary policy to stem the flight of financial capital that is rapidly emptying the Central Bank of dollar reserves.

The 17-day teachers' strike in Buenos Aires province resulted in wage increases of 31 percent in two payments; barely enough to make up for last year's inflation of 28 percent (30 percent for food and fuel) and not enough for what is anticipated for the remainder of this year.

In the private sector, the unions have imposed on their members, without a struggle and in collusion with the CFK government, cuts in real wages of between 2 and 5 percent relative to 2013 price increases. With every passing month, workers' real wages will continue to fall. Retirees face an even worse situation; their six-month 11 percent raise, 40 percent of 2013 inflations, will be wiped out in three months.