

Argentina's president Macri attacks public employees and teachers

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On February 11, two months and a day after being installed as president of Argentina, Mauricio Macri met with leaders of the Argentine trade unions. The purpose of this meeting was to reach a social compact between his administration, the union bureaucracy and big business.

Macri, whose Change coalition (*Cambiamos*) beat the Peronist candidate Daniel Scioli of the Victory Front coalition (*Frente Para la Victoria*, FPV) in a runoff election on November 22, 2015, had met with the Peronist, Radical Party and Social Democratic opposition, as well as representatives of big business (the Argentine Industrial Union) on December 11 and 14. Early this month, Macri also had secret one-on-one discussions with Hugo Moyano, leader of the principal faction of the General Workers Confederation (CGT-Azopardo) and of the Truckers Union.

Though the details of that meeting were not revealed, it is understood that, in return for restraining wage demands, the government offered over 26 billion pesos (approximately 1.8 billion US dollars) to the network of union-administered health agencies (*Obras Sociales*) that every worker must pay into, and from which the labor bureaucracy profits immensely.

At both meetings, Macri seems to have accomplished what he set out to do. The leader of another wing of the CGT, Luis Barrionuevo, declared himself willing to prolong labor's honeymoon with Macri. Like a Mafia Don, Barrionuevo described the horse-trading session with Macri as a deal that was impossible to refuse: "It was great; we all got to put our issues on the table and engage in a dialogue with the government."

Furthermore, Barrionuevo endorsed the current wave of layoffs of public sector workers: "The gnocchi and those that do not work must be all sacked," declared Barrionuevo, "I think there are 200,000 under contract that must go."

Barrionuevo was referring to Macri's declared intention of ridding the public sector of so-called "gnocchi," or phantom employees who allegedly do no work and collect a paycheck every Friday (when Argentines traditionally eat gnocchi). Macri officials claim that those employees constitute a fifth

column for his Peronist predecessor, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, and the Campora Peronist youth movement.

Taking advantage of the fact that the Fernandez administration often hired public employees on a contingency basis, the government terminated some 15,000 mostly poorly paid employees simply by not renewing their contracts, leaving them in the street with no severance or any other benefits. In La Plata, capital of Buenos Aires province, protesting workers, fighting to defend their jobs and isolated by their own union representatives, were savagely attacked by police using tear gas and rubber bullets.

The collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy with the Macri administration is nothing new. It is a replay of the role that the trade unions played under the Kirchnerista (Peronist) administration of Cristina Fernandez, which made possible, without a fight, pro business labor legislation and attacks on living standards. With more than one third of the labor force employed as contingent labor, and one third below the official poverty line, the Argentine working class has suffered three decades of continuous decline in its living standards and working conditions.

Macri's social compact is similar to that of Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto, who rode into power with the support of the trade union bureaucracy and big business, sealing his social alliance with the opposition parties in the "Pact for Mexico." As with Peña Nieto, Macri's ultimate goal is to defend the profits of national and global capitalists by slashing wages and working conditions, so as to attract global enterprises into the country and promote the export of raw materials and consumer goods.

Before the deal with the unions, Macri had already assured himself of the support of the opposition parties, including the FPV and Daniel Scioli, his Peronist second-round opponent, as well as the Peronist governors of many of the country's provinces.

As a consequence of a massive devaluation of the Argentine Peso, Argentina's inflation is accelerating. Inflation estimates for 2016 range from 35 to 40 percent.

Given last year's inflation rate, it is estimated that real

wages have plummeted about 12 percent since September 2015. Just to catch up to September, and in anticipation of 2016, nominal wages should climb by 50 percent at a very minimum.

However, the government seeks to limit pay raises for Argentina's formal sector workers to less than 28 percent.

Government authorities recently announced that all that pensioners can expect this year is a 15.35 percent increase. For those that receive family support payments there will be a 15 percent raise. Confronted by demonstrators holding a sign, accurately describing the results of his policies, that simply read "*Hambre*" (Hunger), Macri cynically wondered out loud if they too were Cristina infiltrators.

Accompanying these measures is the imprint of a police state. In anticipation of popular reaction, the police have been given freedom of action in attacking democratic rights, including the right to stop citizens, demand identification cards, and check on their police records, bringing back to many memories of the country's military dictatorship (1976-83).

A journalist who was stopped speculated that the police profile people who dress modestly, are dark-haired, have Indian features, an appearance that is typical in Buenos Aires of the lower paid rungs of the working class. When questioned by the reporter, the Buenos Aires police agent answered that he was working under "new directives". Under the new rules, anyone caught without documents can be detained, arrested, and charged with the crime of having no identification papers on their person.

In another recent incident, police attacked and injured with rubber bullets a children's band practicing for a carnival festivity in the impoverished working class suburb of Bajo Flores, presumably because they were not getting out of the way of advancing police cars quickly enough. Parents who pleaded with the police to leave were attacked and beaten. Similar acts have occurred in other Argentine cities.

One of the protesting parents described the incident, declaring, "We understand that they are coming after us, in the poor neighborhoods, by intimidating and spreading fear among all carnival participants." In response, Macri's Security Minister Patricia Bullrich was quick to defend the police officers involved.

On January 16, authorities in the northwestern province of Jujuy arrested Milagros Salas, a social activist and deputy in the Mercosur parliament, for leading a protest rally. While the untenable original charges were dropped, she remains in jail charged with "bad administration and illicit association" under legislation dating from the Onganía military dictatorship (1966-70). Salas faces up to six years in prison.

None of these acts of repression could have taken place outside of the Social Pact with the trade unions and

opposition parties being formalized by president Macri.

One of the main goals of the Macri government is the privatization of education. This is part of a global attack on teachers, education and culture.

As Buenos Aires mayor, Macri starved public schools of funds and attacked teachers' living standards and capacity to teach; thus increasing class sizes and paving the way for the privatization of schools.

The deteriorating school system means that many parents in industrial neighborhoods in southern Buenos Aires city increasingly find there is no space available in neighborhood schools and are forced to enroll children in schools farther away, or turn to private schools.

During his tenure in Buenos Aires, Macri required that children who reside across the border, in Buenos Aires Province, be automatically denied entrance in city schools, even if their parents work in the city.

Alongside the destruction of public education, Macri subsidized private and Catholic schools, introduced charter schools and largely proletarianized the teaching profession. A pilot kindergarten program at 41 schools in the city of Buenos Aires will do away with teachers altogether, placing teaching in the hands of a contingent work force administered by non-governmental associations, neighborhood agencies and private individuals, all charged with "promoting psycho-motor development" (that is, warehousing) of very young working class children.

The same process is taking place under provincial governments (FPV, Radical Party, regional parties), albeit at a slower pace, and has met fierce resistance from teachers.

The coming confrontation between teachers and the Macri government will take place as the school year begins this March. One of the main purposes of the social pact with the trade unions is to isolate and atomize the teachers' struggles.



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