

Argentina's Left and Workers' Front (FIT): "Podemos in diapers"

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20 July 2017

In the run-up to the 2017 legislative elections this October, the Argentine political establishment faces its greatest crisis of legitimacy since December 2001-January 2002 when the country had four presidents in less than two weeks amid mass demonstrations and runaway inflation.

This year, demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of striking teachers and other sectors of the workforce broke out in March and April, culminating in a nationwide one-day general strike on April 6.

The three leading political alliances, the Peronist-dominated Front for Victory (FPV), the governing "Let's Change" (Cambiemos) party, and the Peronist split-off United for a New Alternative (UNA) are increasingly discredited amid record levels of poverty and social inequality. In the face of growing opposition, the government of Mauricio Macri, backed by international finance capital, is prosecuting the most ruthless attack on wages, social programs, and corporate regulations since the military dictatorship of 1976 to 1983.

These conditions presage a social explosion in a country with a militant history of class struggle. In this context, the self-proclaimed socialist parties in the Left and Workers' Front (Frente de Izquierda y de los Trabajadores-FIT) have renewed their electoral alliance for the legislative election and are preparing a political trap for workers and youth.

The FIT, founded in 2011 by the Workers' Party (PO), the Socialist Workers Party (PTS), and Socialist Left (IS), won 800,000 votes in the 2015 presidential election, up from 400,000 in the 2013 legislative elections, enough to make the FIT the fourth largest political alliance in Argentina. In 2017, the FIT will have to run for re-election for three of the four seats that it holds in the Chamber of Deputies, but will also run candidates in 22 of the 24 Argentine provinces and is competing in numerous municipal council elections with over 2,000 candidates.

The political and class character of the FIT is revealed in the acrimonious process through which it selects its unified list of candidates, which routinely involves bitter mutual denunciations.

A dispute over a parliamentary post

This year was no exception after the PTS, without any prior notification to its electoral partners in the FIT, announced that it was running Nicolás del Caño, the former student leader who ran as the FIT's presidential candidate in 2015, for the post of national deputy in the province of Buenos Aires. The problem was that the seat was already held by Néstor Pitrola of the PO, who won elections in the district in both 2011 and 2015.

In the end, after an acrimonious dispute in which the PO denounced del Caño as an outsider who had "parachuted" into the district, and the PTS insisted that he would be the most popular candidate (based on what, and with whom it didn't specify), the PO ceded the nomination, thus avoiding having two competing slates going into Argentina's simultaneous and

obligatory open primaries (PASO) in which parties must secure 1.5 percent of the vote to go on to the general election.

This kind of political horse-trading, common to every corrupt bourgeois party, has nothing to do with revolutionary Marxism. As Trotsky made clear in his acute writings on the struggle against fascism in Germany, such "Deals arranged from above which lack a basis in principle will bring nothing but confusion."

"The idea of nominating a candidate for president on the part of the united workers' front is a radically false one," he continued. "A candidate can be nominated only on the basis of a definite program. The party has no right to sacrifice during elections the mobilization of its supporters and the recording of its strength."

Rather than clarifying the political differences between these parties and preparing the Argentine working class for the revolutionary struggles that are on the horizon, the parties making up the FIT subordinate themselves to a program of the lowest common denominator of anti-Macri populism and the pursuit of more parliamentary posts.

Before striking the deal on the common list of candidates, the PO had criticized the PTS for adapting a "radical populist" program based on an orientation to the Argentine upper-middle class.

On February 12, Jorge Altamira, the PO's longtime leader, wrote that the PTS is "giving in with pleasure to populism" by "tailing" the Front for Victory, the bourgeois party led by Peronists associated with "pink tide" governments of Nestor and Cristina Kirchner, who served as president from 2003 to 2007 and 2007 to 2015, respectively.

PTS blames US workers for Trump

Altamira criticized the PTS for its populism and for its identity politics, which found particularly noxious form in the party's blaming the electoral victory of Donald Trump in the US on the "white working class."

"The PTS horizontally counterposes the American proletariat between identities, nationalities, or genders, forsaking its necessary cohesion to struggle for political power," Altamira wrote. He concluded by describing the PTS as "Podemos in diapers" (Podemos en pañales).

Altamira's comparison of the PTS to the development of Podemos—the bourgeois "left" party in Spain which is grooming itself to come to power and play a similar role in betraying the working class as Syriza did in Greece—was both witty and apt. However, he offered no explanation as to what his own party is doing in a common electoral front with such an organization.

Clearly stung by the article, the PTS organized its members to attack it through a series of hostile Facebook posts. PTS members began accusing Altamira and the PO of plagiarizing a February 8, 2017 *World Socialist Web Site* article titled "Left populism": An attack on socialism by the

Argentine pseudo-left.

The PO felt compelled to issue a formal reply on February 21, denying the charge of plagiarizing the WSWs and reaffirming its prior criticism of the PTS.

Not content to let the matter lie, the PTS reiterated its denunciations of the working class in the US in an article by Manolo Romano in the March issue of *Ideas de Izquierda*. The PTS insisted that “non-Hispanic white” workers in the United States “are not affected [by exploitation] the same” way as non-white workers and are to blame for Trump’s victory.

Alongside this reactionary thesis, which blames the working class rather than US capitalism for Trump’s rise, the PTS returned to the plagiarism theme. Altamira’s “central argument is not his own production,” Romano wrote. “It is a copy of an article, which he doesn’t cite, against our international movement published three days earlier by the American World Socialist Web Site, of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) directed by David North.”

The footnote then links to the February 8 WSWs article, and continues: “The WSWs is known among the world left as a website that publishes news and polemics without any accuracy.” Romano sarcastically praises Altamira for not citing the WSWs: “By not citing the source, perhaps without knowing it, Altamira was doing a lot of people a favor, though not by an appropriate method.”

The fact that the WSWs has become a central theme in the PTS-PO dispute gives a sense of the political climate that exists within these groups. They fear the influence of the WSWs because they are concerned their own members will be drawn to a Marxist critique of their opportunism. They have good reason to fear: correspondence and readership statistics confirm that the WSWs is widely followed in Argentina and across Latin America.

The claim of plagiarism is absurd, however. The reality is that Altamira’s criticisms of the PTS have little in common with the analysis in the WSWs’s February 8 article. Altamira and the PO portray PTS’s blatant anti-working class bias and its opportunist orientation to identity politics as the product of political “mistakes” that can be corrected.

In contrast, the WSWs pointed out that the PTS’s perspective expresses the class interests of the Argentine upper-middle class, which has grown wealthier at the expense of the working masses, but which has certain grievances with the top 1 percent over the distribution of privilege, for example positions in the trade unions and academia.

A slander against the World Socialist Web Site

The PTS’s claim that the WSWs publishes news and political analysis “without any accuracy” is a slander. The WSWs is the world—not the “American”—publication of the International Committee of the Fourth International. It is the most widely read socialist web site, publishing articles in 16 languages to a daily readership of over 50,000. It is opposed by the pseudo-left of the world because the WSWs is the defender of orthodox Marxism and an opponent of the “left” apologists for capitalism and imperialist war.

If the leadership of the PO had any political courage, they would have denounced the PTS’s anti-communist rant and defended the WSWs, which the PO’s publication *Prensa Obrera* cites regularly and which is widely read amongst its own membership. Instead, the PO remained silent.

The exchange exposes the political opportunism which lies beneath this cowardice. If the PTS is a populist, pro-Kirchnerist party, then why has the PO been in an electoral alliance with this group for the last six years? If the PTS is “Podemos in diapers,” then the PO plays the role of helping

powder its backside.

Announcing the joint electoral slate at a PO trade union gathering last month, PO leader Nestor Pitrola praised the “emergence of struggle in the working class and other classes.” He stressed: “The struggle is fine, but if it wasn’t isolated it would be better, we will use all of our methods and political work so that it can be joined to the struggles of the working class in particular, and the popular movement in general.”

This statement has nothing to do with socialism and reveals the hollowness of the PO’s “left” criticisms of the PTS. His call for an alliance with “other classes” and the “popular movement” equals subordinating the independent struggle of the working class to the pro-capitalist demands of the Argentine upper-middle class. Following in the footsteps of their Pabloite predecessors, the opportunists cover their distance from Marxism with claims of the need to break their “isolation.” What they really mean is they need to break their own isolation from the parties of the banks and corporations.

In its deal for a the continued electoral alliance, the FIT is welcoming into its fold the Popular Power-Left Current, a coalition of pseudo-left and Guevarist parties that openly calls for an alliance with Kirchnerism and venerates the petty-bourgeois nationalist and Castroite politics that led to a bloody series of defeats for the Latin American working class in the 20th century.

Historical roots of the PTS and the fight against Pabloism

The roots of the PTS itself lie in the disastrous adaptation to these politics in Argentina. The party traces its origins to the break-up of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) following the death of its leader, Nahuel Moreno, in 1987. After breaking with the ICFI in 1963 and reunifying with the Pabloites, Moreno’s party rapidly degenerated. Orienting itself to various nationalist movements like Peronism and Castroism, as well as to the Argentine Social Democratic movement and Stalinism, it played a critical role in politically disarming the Argentine working class in advance of the 1976 military coup.

The PO, on the other hand, was founded in 1964 by a group of radicalized youth who emerged from the Guevarist Movement of the Revolutionary Left, founded by Silvio Frondizi, a radical sociologist and brother of Argentina’s Radical Party president Arturo Frondizi. Under the name Workers’ Politics, they oriented to the trade unions. The PO has incessantly appealed to the main General Confederation of Workers (CGT) to adopt a more militant stance, while subordinating workers to the bureaucracy’s Peronist program of national unity with the bourgeoisie.

The PO is not part of any coherent international tendency and exists as a purely national organization. It was recently associated with the Greek Workers Revolutionary Party (EEK) of Savas Michael-Matsas, who broke with the ICFI in 1985 to embrace Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s *perestroika* as the dawn of the political revolution in the USSR. The PO and the EEK fell out over Altamira’s open support in 2012 for Syriza forming a “left government” in Greece, which cut across the EEK’s attempts to provide Syriza with a “left” cover, while seeking to unite with the collection of Maoists and various pseudo-left groups in the Antarsya coalition.

What unites the PTS and the PO is the fundamentally nationalist orientation that has characterized a whole series of organizations claiming to be Trotskyist in Latin America. This orientation, which begins with national politics and the national party, rather than the driving forces of the world socialist revolution and the struggle to build an international party, has again and again turned these organizations into left props for the rule of the national bourgeoisie.

The inescapable contradictions behind the PO's alliance with the PTS proves that the organization has failed to work through the history of the Fourth International and has not internalized the political lessons of the devastating role of Pabloism, both within Latin America and internationally. The PO is repeating the opportunism of numerous Latin American Pabloite groups who justified alliances with bourgeois nationalists, petty-bourgeois guerrilla movements, and Stalinists based on the anti-Marxist conception that "going to the masses" required the abandonment of a socialist and internationalist program.

The political disarming of the Latin American working class that resulted from this opportunism has had deadly consequences. It is directly responsible for the inequality, poverty, and imperialist exploitation which dominate the region today.

Those who are serious about working through these issues must be familiar with the significance of the split in 1953 between the Pabloite International Secretariat and the International Committee of the Fourth International. They must understand the nature of the fight waged by the ICFI against the reunification of the IS with the American Socialist Workers Party in 1963 and must study the subsequent disintegration of the United Secretariat and the integration of the Lambertist movement into the bourgeois political establishment in France and worldwide. They must familiarize themselves with the split between the Workers Revolutionary Party in England and the ICFI between 1982 and 1986. An extensive documentary record of the issues giving rise to the split can be found in *How the WRP Betrayed Trotskyism* and *The Heritage We Defend*.

The PO and PTS do not want discussion of these issues because confronting the history of the Fourth International would expose the political bankruptcy of the FIT.



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