

Argentina's Congress passes social security "reform" after violent crackdown on protesters

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The right-wing government of President Mauricio Macri succeeded Tuesday in pushing sweeping pension "reform" legislation through Argentina's Congress, raising the retirement age from 65 to 70 for men and from 60 to 63 for women and slashing benefits for more than 40 percent of the Argentine population, including the elderly, the disabled and children living in poverty.

The Tuesday morning 128-116 vote followed days of angry protests, including violent clashes in the streets of Buenos Aires on Monday that saw over 100 people injured and dozens arrested.

The streets of the Argentine capital were the scene on both December 14 and this Monday of state terror reminiscent of the 1980s, during the waning days of the Argentine military junta (1976-1983).

On the morning of Thursday December 14, hundreds of riot police armed with tear gas, rubber bullets, paint balls, batons and pepper spray, and equipped with motorcycles and water cannons, set up barriers around the Argentine Congress. The mass deployment of repressive forces was in response to the expectation of mass protests against the vote in the lower house for the pension "reforms."

At around 2 PM last Thursday, thousands of demonstrators facing off with police were attacked with high-pressure streams from water cannons and with tear gas. The attacks by the riot police would continue for five hours.

Periodically the riot police would open up the barricades, clearing the path for motorcycle-mounted police firing tear gas and rubber bullets, with swarms of police on foot singling out people, choking and hitting them with batons. Nobody was spared, not even members of the Chamber of Deputies or members of the press.

The repression is indicative of the government's fear of a social explosion. While President Mauricio Macri's ruling *Cambiamos* coalition obtained 42 percent of the votes in October's legislative elections, it has become evident that, rather than a vote of confidence in Macri's right-wing

austerity policies, the election was a rejection of the Peronist parties (*Frente Para la Victoria*, and *Partido Justicialista*).

Now, as the Macri administration proceeds with a policy of austerity attacks on the past conquests of the working class, such as the slashing of social security, to be followed by legislation in the next few months to roll back working conditions, for the benefit of the Argentine landed and industrial oligarchies, international big business and Wall Street vulture funds, conditions are building up for an intensification of class struggle.

As Congress members assembled inside the chamber of deputies, tens of thousands congregated in the *Plaza del Congreso* and faced off against the police, to express mass opposition to an attack on social security payments and welfare measures that had already been approved by the Senate.

In part because of the enormous national opposition to that measure, the government coalition of *Cambiamos* and *Partido Justicialista* was initially unable to obtain a quorum in the chamber of deputies, much less a majority vote for the "reforms."

The measures represent a wholesale assault on pensions and welfare payments that changes the cost of living allowance formula that is used to restore purchasing power from the country's yearly inflation (estimated at 27 percent this year and higher for 2018). The current formula is based on a calculation of the number of workers in the formal sector and the amount of money being paid into the Social Security Administration (ANSES). Social Security payments are updated every three months. The formula also serves to cover subsidies for children of families that are disabled or in poverty (the AUH program).

The new formula will rely 70 percent on the rate of inflation and 30 percent on an index of wages. It is expected to save the government some sixty billion pesos (US \$3.5 billion) and US \$4.7 billion next year.

Under the old formula, a minimal monthly pension of

7,244 pesos (US \$400) would rise in two steps to 9,602 pesos by next December. The new formula doubles the number of steps, slashing the December payment to 8,640 pesos. The average retiree receives 10,000 pesos a month (US \$570), far less than what is considered a living wage, estimated at 17,000 pesos per month (US \$970). Many retired workers report not being able to afford medications or decent medical care, and living in substandard housing.

Initially last Thursday, House speaker Mario Monzo declared a quorum and attempted to ready the chamber for a vote. However, the quorum proved very unstable, as some of the Macri coalition partners, aware during the session (which lasted about an hour) of the street battle outside, kept leaving their seats and interrupting the quorum.

At the same time, opposition legislators from the Victory Front (*Frente Para la Victoria*) wing of Peronism and from left-wing parties angrily denounced what was taking place outside, shoved and shouted down any attempt to impose order.

At one point, an attempt was made to grab the microphone away from Monzo. In an attempt to repair Thursday's parliamentary fiasco, on Friday representatives of Macri's right wing *Cambiamos* coalition, the *Bloque Justicialista* and several provincial governments regrouped and sweetened the deal. Upon approval of the measure, a presidential decree will grant a one-time paltry bonus for those retirees whose monthly social security checks are less than 10,000 pesos and for AUH recipients of between 400 and 750 pesos, for a total of four billion pesos, less than seven percent of the expected savings.

Shortly after 3PM, at the initiative of some Macri supporters, Monzo suspended the session, temporarily ending the expectation that the measure would pass speedily and become law; the Argentine Senate had approved the measure earlier this month.

This Monday, shortly after 1 PM—as the house of deputies was once again attempting to vote on the social security pensions and welfare cuts—a protest march of 200,000 people, from different corners of this vast city, took over the streets and surrounded the Congress. Many of the demonstrators came on their own, or as groups of neighbors. The march represented a mass repudiation of the government's attacks on pension rights.

As the protesters marched on Congress Square, the police appeared to adopt a different tactic from last Thursday, with groups of municipal cops standing their ground behind their shields in front of the barricades surrounding Congress, while a group of several scores of “*violentos*” pelted the police with rocks, bricks, and what appeared to be naval flares.

Given the remarkable degree of coordination of the

attack—with one group of attackers retreating and being replaced by another group, and the police response, hiding behind shields and then responding with tear gas, rubber bullets and paint ball bullets—the entire operation appeared to be the work of police *agent provocateurs*.

The police “response” to being attacked by these *violentos* was to mete out repression against the massive demonstration itself, with tear gas, rubber bullets, paint balls, pepper spray and high-pressure water.

Four hours into these acts of repression, the bulk of the demonstrators had been pushed back toward *Plaza de Mayo* Square, site of Argentina's government house.

Two incidents revealed the savage nature of the police attacks. Six blocks from the Congress building groups of office workers came down from their work locations, waving national flags and singing the national anthem. The response by federal police was brutal, chasing down onlookers and office workers, knocking them down with water cannons and firing rubber bullets.

Motorcycle mounted police then moved in against fleeing demonstrators, office workers and onlookers, catching up to them and grabbing them by the hair, and firing rubber bullets at close range. The police even fired tear gas into eateries and bars, forcing people to flee into rest rooms and hide under tables and counters.

In the evening and into the night in middle class and working class neighborhoods of Buenos Aires people took to the streets banging pots in repudiation of police repression and of the day's events.

The state repression of the protests exposes the fragility of the government coalition and the underlying political crisis of bourgeois rule in Argentina.

The country is in economic stagnation following a recession in 2012, with high levels of unemployment and inflation (so-called “stagflation”) and with growing inequality.

Out of a population of 40 million, 31.4 percent of households (or 13.5 million people) live below the poverty line; this includes 48.4 percent of children under the age of 14. Six percent of the population reports missing meals every month. This takes place in a country that boasts producing enough meat and grain to feed 400 million people around the world.



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