

Argentine teachers begin school year with a national strike

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Tens of thousands of Argentine teachers and supporters marched Monday to the Argentine Congress as part of a 48-hour national strike Monday and Tuesday to initiate the school year. The action was staged in protest against cuts in public education spending and attempts by the government to drastically reduce the real wages of teachers, offering a 15 percent raise when inflation reached 25 percent last year, and is expected to be similar this year.

Coming a month after the right-wing government of President Mauricio Macri brutally repressed protests by hundreds of thousands of youth and workers against pension cuts, the strike expresses the ongoing resistance among workers to the brutal social attacks.

According to estimates of the Argentine government, about 30 to 35 percent of public teachers nationwide participated in the strike, while the Buenos Aires province reports a 47 percent walkout. The major education trade union, the CTERA, which is a branch of the right-wing CTA union confederation, insists that the strike was observed in 85 percent of Argentine public schools.

Significantly, in the provinces of Cordoba and Mendoza, home of some of the most militant workers recently and historically, marked by the uprisings at the height of the Argentine workers' movement known as the *Cordobazo* in 1969, and *Mendozazo* in 1972, the numbers were the lowest, with the unions admitting a majority went to work.

A relatively low participation in these areas reflects the sentiment among more and more workers that the trade unions cannot be pressured into leading a struggle that defends their social rights.

Under pressure of the health care workers and other state employees, the CTA was obliged to convoke a one-day strike for these sectors on Tuesday in the province of Buenos Aires, with workers calling for higher salaries and public investment in education and health. The Buenos Aires government of the ruling Cambiemos coalition under María Eugenia Vidal is currently closing dozens of public schools and carrying out mass firings.

However, perhaps the starkest attacks against teachers are

being carried out in Santa Cruz province by the Peronist, Alicia Kirchner, sister of the ex-president Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007). After cutting real wages for teachers in 2016 by 7 percent, she sought another massive cut of 20 percent last year, leading workers to strike for over 100 days. Kirchner has avoided making an offer so far this year.

At the national level, real wages measured by the Ministry of Education fell for teachers between 2011 and 2015, during the second term in office of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, and are currently more than 5 percent below the 2011 level.

As a means of dividing the workforce, governors of all provinces had agreed last November and December to a "fiscal deal" with the Macri administration, including keeping salary negotiations at a provincial level but abiding by the limits imposed by the Casa Rosada, Macri's presidential palace. In accordance with these dictates, the trade unions and local governments of seven provinces reached back-room, sell-out deals before this week's strike and ordered the workers not to join their colleagues across the country.

"There is no nationwide conflict; the provinces are the ones that have to discuss and settle differences," Macri provocatively declared on Monday. An official declaration also underscored that teachers will not be paid for either day they miss and will lose an ARS\$6,000 (US\$300) attendance bonus.

On the other hand, trade union leaders have sought to limit the demands of the teachers. The head of the SUTEBA-CTA trade union, Roberto Baradel, who presents himself as more loyal to the teachers, simply called for a "trigger clause" to supposedly compensate teachers if inflation goes beyond the settled increase.

However, a lawyer for the CTA's own "Social Rights" think tank, Luis Campos, commented to the Socialist Workers' Party (PTS) press last June that "in terms of a more political evaluation, I think that it's a necessity to publicly present agreements that don't have a very significant salary increase and, in this way, making them

more palatable. What is true is that the [“trigger” or inflation-control] clauses don’t protect automatically in any way the salaries of the workers.”

Not wanting to harm its close relations with the leaders of a trade union bureaucracy of which it is a part, the Morenoite PTS doesn’t comment on such blatant affirmations of the key role that the trade unions play in suppressing opposition and directly imposing the government’s austerity measures.

Their coverage of the 48-hour strike simply sought to orient workers fully to the CTA bureaucrats, Sonia Alesso and Hugo Yasky, calling on them and the other right-wing central, the CGT, to present a “plan of struggle” to resist Macri’s social attacks. Moreover, they fed into the CTA promises of further mobilizations in April and into the illusions that this demobilization scheme, almost identical to last year’s, will result in a broader struggle among workers.

Not only do teachers share the same demands as the rest of the working class—a secure job, decent salaries, benefits and pensions, quality health care and public education, investments in public infrastructure—but teacher negotiations in Argentina have historically been used as a reference point for the rest of the public and private sectors.

Moreover, the defense of public education has become a front line of class struggle internationally, with the ruling class seeking to antagonize teachers as “privileged” and “selfish,” while their living standards and those of the majority of workers continue to fall.

On the other hand, the wealth of the financial aristocracy in Argentina and internationally has enjoyed an unprecedented boom amid a stagnating real economy. The South American stock markets saw some of the highest jumps in the world last year—50.5 percent in Buenos Aires, followed by Santiago (44 percent) and Lima (31 percent), all well above the US Dow Jones index (25 percent).

Such financial speculation soars thanks to the most ruthless transfer of wealth from the working class to the bourgeoisie through regressive taxes, public bond speculation, austerity measures and attacks against health benefits, pensions, wages and jobs.

As harbingers of the resurgence of the class struggle currently being experienced internationally, workers in precisely those countries demonstrated an enormous will to fight last year, with two million Chileans marching against the privatized pension system in March, hundreds of thousands of Argentine teachers leading a national strike that month, and more than 200,000 Peruvian teachers carrying out a national strike for two months in July and August.

At the same time, regressive education “reforms” have been implemented in one country after the next, initiated with Mexico’s in 2013, imposed through a brutal crackdown

epitomized by the disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa student teachers in September 2014. Most recently, Washington and Puerto Rican authorities have been seeking to exploit the destruction wrought by Hurricane María to implement a generalized privatization of education on the island, which is virtually certain to be used as an example for the rest of Latin America and the US.

As Latin American governments prepare for challenges from the working class internally and greater competition for markets abroad, they have increased their national security and military spending. Macri has been carrying out a renewal of Argentina’s armed forces with a \$2 billion package since entering office, while the Obama administration more than tripled its security aid to Argentina in 2016.

Just as in West Virginia, the discussions between the state legislators over the teachers’ strike have centered around its impact on Wall Street credit ratings, the Argentine authorities are paying more attention to the demands of the parasites in the global financial centers than to the denunciations by students and teachers of the horrendous conditions in the classrooms and at home imposed by a capitalist system that places above all else the imperative of immediate profits for the capitalist class.

Against the same financial oligarchs, workers in Argentina, West Virginia and internationally need to free themselves from the nationalist shackles and reformist illusions enforced by the capitalist political establishments and their servants in the trade unions by organizing independent rank-and-file committees and unifying their struggle into an international political movement against the capitalist system.



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