

Mass strike erupts in Buenos Aires after two school workers die from gas explosion

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On Friday, teachers in Argentina's province of Buenos Aires carried out a one-day strike to protest the deaths of two public-school employees as the result of a gas explosion in the town of Moreno, on the western outskirts of the capital city of Buenos Aires.

Thousands of teachers and supporters from all over the province marched in downtown Moreno, amid nationwide condemnations blaming the provincial and national governments.

Thursday morning, a few minutes before students entered school in this town, the vice-principal, Sandra Calamaro, 48, was killed in an explosion caused by a defective heater fed by a gas cylinder. The school was not connected to the gas grid. Another school employee, Rubén Rodríguez, 45, also died while sweeping the schoolyard. The blast toppled one of the walls of the school.

An official in Moreno's local government told the press that the catastrophe was "preventable" since parents and school authorities had filed several complaints over gas leaks with the School Council, which is controlled by the Province of Buenos Aires under Governor María Eugenia Vidal, one of the top figures in Argentina's right-wing ruling Cambiemos coalition.

As recently as Wednesday, there was a demonstration outside the School Council in Moreno to demand improvements in schools.

The WSWS interviewed several teachers calling for action over the deaths. Ricardo, a high school teacher in the San Martín district in Buenos Aires told the WSWS that he felt "as if losing someone close, even though I didn't know them; it was easy to put myself in their place." He indicated that, while the trade unions sought to limit the strike to Moreno, the rank-and-file teachers across the province pushed forward a provincial-wide action.

The deaths, moreover, "vindicate the struggle and demands of teachers" against their vilification by the media and the current and previous governments, he added. Fed up with the "suffering and strangulation" caused by high inflation and regressive taxes, Ricardo called upon teachers

and workers to unite across the country and organize an indefinite strike.

The fact that this incident immediately resulted in renewed mass demonstrations and generalized calls for a definitive struggle to end the onslaught against the working class by the administration of President Mauricio Macri reflects a political convergence of urgent social demands and mounting anger among workers in Argentina.

On the other hand, the trade unions and the pseudo-left have seen the incident in a very different light. The trade union bureaucracy in the education sector of Buenos Aires, organized in the United Teachers Front of Buenos Aires (FUDB), is seeking to use the calamity as an opportunity to isolate the teachers' struggle from other sectors and other parts of the country, while creating illusions in their endless "dialogues" with the Vidal government.

Since 2016, Vidal has decreased education's share of the provincial budget from 27.8 to 24 percent and has let inflation erode its real value—the real decrease is equivalent to enough funding to build 998 new high schools. The deaths in Moreno have not only exposed the criminal indifference of the government, but also its fraudulent claims about "prioritizing infrastructure" through a supposed renovations program for schools, hospitals and other public facilities to justify attacking the real salaries of state workers and closing almost 50 schools.

Between 2008 and 2015, however, the previous Buenos Aires governor, Daniel Scioli, and the administration of Cristina Kirchner—both considered representatives of the Latin American "Pink Tide" led in Argentina by the Peronist Front for Victory (FPV)—were already imposing drastic austerity on public infrastructure and education. During this period, education in Buenos Aires fell from 33 to 27.8 percent of the total provincial budget. Scioli's presidential campaign in 2015, running for the FPV, boasted constantly that his enormous disbursements to bondholders cut the province's debt in half.

More broadly, since 2012, the Argentine ruling class has responded to the worsening economic downturn and

growing budgetary crisis by turning government debt into a source of billions of dollars of profits for the parasitic Argentine and international financial oligarchy.

While hundreds of thousands of jobs have been erased and double-digit inflation has dramatically reduced real salaries and social spending, Argentina boasts the highest interest rates globally, which have fed a stock market boom and the fastest growing pool of millionaires in the world, according to a 2017 Credit Suisse study. In June, the government accepted a new US\$50 billion IMF loan.

Social opposition against rising inequality, particularly since the beginning of the year, has produced an ongoing wave of demonstrations and strikes that the trade unions have been struggling to keep under their control. However, these have not led to any improvements in the conditions of workers.

Afraid that social anger will turn to alternatives independent of the trade unions, the ruling Cambiemos coalition has turned to criminalizing protests through exorbitant fines. These threats have in turn been used by the trade unions to justify the suppression of the strike wave, as shown by the cancellation of a three-day strike in June by the Truckers' Union.

Last Monday, the first day of the school semester, the Argentine teachers' trade-union confederation CTERA called for a 48-hour strike in schools nationally, in response to an insulting 16 percent wage increase offered by the government (in the face of 30 percent inflation). Citing possible fines for violating a period of "obligatory conciliation" around contract negotiations, four of the five trade unions in the FUDB decided not to participate; however, over 40 percent of teachers in the Buenos Aires province joined the strike.

Three days before the explosion in Moreno, the Buenos Aires authorities inspected 9,838 schools, not to take inventory of the widespread hazardous conditions, decaying infrastructure and lack of school materials, but to penalize teachers participating in the strike. They slapped a US\$24 million fine on SUTEBA, which didn't lift the strike.

Seeking to exploit the capitalist murder in Moreno to reinvigorate their image after years of enforcing wage cuts, the deterioration of infrastructure, and school closures in the name of the ruling elite, the FUDB went ahead and convoked the provincial strike on Friday.

The Workers Party (PO), which is a leading member of the Left Front (FIT) and has several federal, provincial and municipal legislators and controls a few trade unions, responded with a series of articles cheering the response of the trade unions and blaming strictly the Vidal and Macri administrations.

On Thursday, featuring an article with a title calling on the

education minister to resign, the PO presented the Peronist trade unions as the leadership to "defeat this government" and demanded a "plan of struggle." In this way, the article falsifies the role of these bureaucracies, exclaiming: "Everyone, to the FUDB strike. ... Twenty-four hours after the overwhelming Buenos Aires teachers' strike that the illegal obligatory conciliation couldn't stop, all trade unions of the FUDB—including the four that lifted their measures—have called for a new provincial walkout."

The WSWS interviewed a history teacher in the Lomas de Zamora and Almirante Brown districts in the Buenos Aires province, who preferred to remain anonymous. Denouncing the Kirchnerist leadership of the SUTEBA and the trade-union bureaucracy as a whole for isolating the struggles of the Moreno teachers from the rest of the province and country, she described them as "nationalist and bourgeois," adding that they "serve the interests of different sectors of the bourgeoisie" and "obstruct class consciousness."

She had not heard about the teacher rebellions against the trade unions in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, but commented that "an organization at the international level doesn't exist even in the imagination" of the trade union bureaucracy.

After describing the FIT trade union delegates as "more militant," she was asked directly about what effect do FIT's demands for a "plan of struggle" directed at the Kirchnerist trade-union bureaucracy have on teachers. She responded: "So far, during the Cambiemos administration, there have been some agreements between the left [FIT] and Kirchnerism, so they sometimes agree. Many teachers who are not members of their party do adhere to strikes called by the left's trade union bloc in the province of Buenos Aires."

FIT's efforts to use the trade unions to channel opposition behind the ruling establishment are not going to push the trade unions and official politics to the left but are directed at containing the eruption of struggle against escalating attacks against social and democratic rights by the bourgeoisie. This "left" populist front speaks for privileged layers in the middle class and increasingly for sectors of the bourgeoisie that have themselves become richer from the austerity-driven agenda of Wall Street.



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