

Argentine teachers go back to work after three-day strike

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In addition to the political and economic implosion of Venezuela, under threat of imperialist intervention by the United States, and in the context of the geopolitical conflict between the US and Russia and China, other nations in South America, including Chile, Brazil, Ecuador and Argentina, face deep economic recessions, instability and an explosion of struggles by the working class.

On March 6, Argentine teachers launched a three-day strike, postponing the beginning of the school year. The strike was widely observed across the country. The main issue in the walkout was a demand for a wage increase to make up for past inflation. The buying power of teachers' wages is being demolished every day by an inflation rate that is near 50 percent. The teachers are demanding a national monthly wage of 26,000 pesos (\$US630).

According to the Marine Vilte Institute, an education think tank, "while teachers average starting salary is \$US309 a month, a typical Argentine family needs \$US644 to be above the poverty line."

Joining education workers last week were judicial employees, doctors and other public employees. The strike, which resolved nothing, revealed how every political force in Argentina has lined up against the education workers and the entire working class.

The Argentine teachers' union, CTERA, which organized the 72-hour protest, working from the same script as teachers' unions across the world, engaged in back-room deals with the provincial governments and with the administration of President Mauricio Macri, isolated and limited the strike to three days, and used it to call on the teachers to support the populist and corporatist Peronist parties.

A supporting and criminal role in conspiring against the Argentine teachers' struggle and attempting to keep

workers tied to their trade unions, to Peronism and to the Macri administration has been carried out by the pseudo-Trotskyists of the Workers Left Front (FIT), who campaign to pressure the trade unions to the left. Their nationalist demands, for a broad electoral front of the entire left, for "*asambleas de base*" (members assemblies) to pressure their own unions and to coordinate with other, supposedly more militant, unions are designed to detour the working class away from an independent struggle for political power.

This year's three-day walkout was a poor repeat of the two-day strike of 2018 in which the teachers also demanded wage increases to compensate for inflation. At the time, teachers rallied for days in downtown Buenos Aires. Teachers carried out repeated and very militant strikes and protests throughout 2017 and 2018.

By keeping education wages below the rate of inflation and by starving public education of funds, the Macri administration has used the teachers as a way of disciplining the entire working class, relying on a sell-out agreement made with the CGT trade union federation in 2016 to keep workers divided and to limit the working-class response to the level of isolated and toothless protest struggles.

Confident in the support of the trade unions and Peronist legislators, in 2018 president Macri unilaterally suppressed negotiations over salaries, training programs, federal support to education in poor provinces, measures aimed at preventing school failures, and other education issues.

This time, in response to the three-day strike, María Eugenia Vidal, the right-wing governor of Buenos Aires Province, threatened to withhold teachers' wages during the demonstrations. The province had promised a salary increase equivalent to the current rate of inflation plus 5 percent, not payable until January 2020.

No offer was made to make up for the purchasing power lost in 2018.

As with the economic depression of 2001-2002 (with unemployment rates of more than 25 percent), Argentina today is at the edge of a social explosion. Even the notoriously unreliable and politically manipulated statistics of the Macri administration indicate near-depression levels of unemployment and underemployment and skyrocketing levels of youth unemployment. Hidden behind the official rates of national unemployment—10 percent—and youth unemployment—16 percent—is the low labor force participation rate, as workers give up looking for work and abandon the workforce. Argentina's labor force participation rate, 49 percent of the labor force, is 10 percentage points less than in Brazil.

Argentina's debt crisis and its agreement to a \$US57 billion IMF rescue package, contingent on the mass impoverishment of the population, is further enriching the financial elite and the Wall Street vultures, while widening the gap between the rich elites and agricultural oligarchies that the Macri administration represents and the masses.

Argentina's public debt of more than \$US300 billion simply cannot be paid. There is really no way that the debt payment agreement with the IMF and the Wall Street financiers and hedge funds can be carried out, except for an all-out war against the Argentine working class. At the same time, the consequences of a debt default can be equally disastrous, as the country is cut off from international credit markets and trade.

Along with the impoverishment of the working class and of the lower middle class is an enormous increase in the wealth gap. In truth, poverty and inequality in Argentina, and every other country, go hand in hand with the accumulation of obscene fortunes at the top of society.

Whoever wins the 2019 presidential elections in October, the banks and financial interests will continue to impose austerity and neoliberal policies, while the vast majority starves and the most marginalized become truly transformed into a residuum of misery.

The *Telesur* press agency recently reported that 3.4 million Argentines, 7.9 percent of the population, limit themselves to one meal a day, in a nation that produces an agricultural bounty each year capable of feeding 400 million people. Poverty rates continue to escalate;

currently, almost one quarter of all Argentines are in poverty.



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