

Argentine teachers strike to protest assault by union thugs

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On Thursday, teachers belonging to Argentina's National Federation of Education Workers (CTERA) carried out a national strike and demonstrations in solidarity with teachers of the Chubut Province, whose pickets and roadblocks were attacked at dawn Wednesday by more than one hundred union goons.

The thugs were identified with the Oil and Gas Workers Union, whose leader Jorge "Loma" Ávila had threatened to "run over" protesters last week, physically broke through and burned down the blockades, leaving at least five female teachers injured in Comodoro Rivadavia.

Yesterday, the Buenos Aires daily *Página 12* released a video that showed teachers pleading with police officials to aid their coworkers under attack but being ignored.

Since mid-August, teachers and other government workers have been blocking highways used for oil transportation in the cities of Comodoro Rivadavia and Sarmiento to demand that the Chubut government pay wages owed since February and halt austerity measures more broadly.

The governor, Mariano Arcioni, leads the Peronist We are All Chubut Party, while Ávila is aligned with the Kirchnerist wing of the Peronist trade union bureaucracy.

In announcing the 24-hour strike Thursday, CTERA leader Sonia Alesso issued a mealy-mouthed appeal to president Mauricio Macri to pressure Chubut authorities to resolve the dispute. The General Confederation of Teachers (CGT) has remained silent.

On the contrary, teachers responded to news of the attack with mass rallies and marches throughout Wednesday across Chubut, condemning the assault and advancing the teachers demands. Mass spontaneous protests took place in Comodoro Rivadavia, Trelew,

Esquel, and other cities in the oil-producing province in southern Argentina.

On Thursday, the strike shut down public and private schools all over Argentina. The march and rally in Buenos Aires drew the support of other workers and students, many of whom also joined the strike.

The teachers and their supporters first rallied in front of the Chubut building in Buenos Aires and then in Plaza de Mayo Square, across from Argentina's government house.

At Plaza de Mayo, strikers were joined by anti-austerity protesters sympathizing with the *piquetero* movement. This coalition of organizations had rallied the day before demanding that the Macri administration address the deepening food crisis in Argentina with food pantries and subsidies to feed the poor and elementary school children.

The demonstrations on Wednesday and Thursday took place in the context of a sharp worsening of the economic crisis beginning in 2018. Marked by high inflation, increasing unemployment and the collapse of the value of the national currency, the crisis was further intensified after the August 11 primary elections, in which Peronist candidates Alberto Fernández, and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner received an overwhelming lead ahead of incumbent president Mauricio Macri.

In addition to denouncing the cowardly attack on Chubut teachers, protesters demanded the payment of back wages, the lifting of a wage freeze, and wage increases in accordance with inflation of over fifty percent this year. The Chubut teachers are also raised the alarm regarding the food crisis that has resulted from the collapse of the nation's economy.

Alejandro Finocchiaro, Macri's Education Minister, blamed the Chubut authorities for promising wages it

cannot pay, indicating that no help will be forthcoming from the Macri administration.

In response to a historic debt crisis, the government of Mauricio Macri has engaged in brutal austerity policies, attacking workers' wages, pensions and social programs to service interest payments to Wall Street investors and international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The strikes and mass demonstrations in Argentina are part of a mounting popular response to these attacks on living standards.

A large swath of Argentine society faces a lack of food. Reports by teachers about the growing hunger among their students have become common place. In Ituzaingó, a Buenos Aires suburb, mayor Alberto Descalzo recently described how, at school cafeterias, teachers cut apples in half to feed hungry children, because the government's food supply "is insufficient."

In San Martín, a working-class suburb, Pepe Di Paula, a local Catholic priest, spoke of the "very significant drop in living standards" that forces growing numbers of people to appeal to the local church at the end of the month for money, food and essential items.

"Those that never had gone to a soup kitchen, are now beginning to do so," declared Di Paula. Given the absence of any assistance from the government, San Martín residents are organizing community fundraising events, such as kermesses, for those in greater need.

In another suburb, Lomas de Zamora, provincial authorities are sending half of the 29 pesos (US \$0.50) per meal per pupil. Each student ends up getting 14.50 pesos worth of food.

North of Buenos Aires, in the Entre Ríos province, Barrios de Pie, a community NGO that runs soup kitchens in the province, weighed and measured youth recipients and reported "fifteen percent malnutrition."

Wednesday and Thursday's mass mobilizations by teachers, students and other sections of the working class mark an initial stage of a bitter struggle. As in the struggles of 2001 and 2002, the working class confronts the same list of false friends, Peronism, the trade union bureaucracy and the nationalist pseudo-left parties.

The Peronist presidential candidate, Alberto Fernandez is currently visiting Spain and Portugal and openly declared his willingness to deal with the current

debt crisis in the interests of vulture capitalists, banks and the International Monetary Fund.

The trade union bureaucracy is acting as a Fifth Column in the struggles of the Argentine working class. Both, CTERA leader Sonia Alesso, and Jorge Ávila of the Oil and Gas Workers Union are aligned with the Kirchnerist wing of Peronism and with the Moyano faction of the trade union apparatus, which has made every possible effort to block and sabotage workers' struggles against the pro-business policies of Macri and the provincial governors, many of which, like Chubut, are controlled by Peronist governors and legislatures.

At the same time, the nationalist pseudo-left organizations such as the parties of the Workers Left Front-Unity (FIT-U) and the New Movement Toward Socialism (Nuevo MAS) are fostering illusions on a supposedly more militant, "combative" section of the same repressive and pro-capitalist bureaucracy.

Their endless appeals to these rotten organizations are aimed at preventing the necessary break by workers with the trade unions and Peronist parties and facilitating assaults such as that in Chubut. Workers must take the struggle in their own hands by organizing independent rank-and-file committees, and appeal to their class brothers and sisters across the country and internationally fighting against the same corporate and financial ruling elites.



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