

Argentine filmmaker Fernando “Pino” Solanas dies from coronavirus at 84

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28 January 2021

Argentine filmmaker Fernando “Pino” Solanas died in Paris on November 6 at the age of 84, a victim of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of his death, he was Argentina’s ambassador to UNESCO, appointed by the Peronist government of President Alberto Fernandez.

Solanas was born in Buenos Aires in 1936 during the Great Depression, in a period of Argentine history known as the “Infamous Decade” (*Década Infame*) characterized by military coups and the threat of coups, political corruption and economic misery for the masses.

These tumultuous years also brought into being an organization of radical intellectuals known as FORJA (Fuerza de Orientación Radical de la Joven Argentina—Force for the Radical Orientation of Young Argentina), which opposed British and US imperialism. Fernando Solanas was influenced in particular by FORJA, as well as later by the 1959 Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro. In the 1960s, Solanas would dedicate himself to making socially conscious films, in which he depicted the conditions of the Argentine masses.

However, his guiding political orientation became and remained Peronism, a movement he joined in 1956 and supported until his death. Founded by Gen. Juan Peron in the 1940s, this movement rested upon the military, a corporatist labor bureaucracy and sections of the Argentine bourgeoisie. Influenced by both bourgeois nationalism and fascism, it promoted national capitalist development while suppressing, often violently, the class struggle.

Solanas was one of the founders of *Grupo Cine Liberación* (the Liberation Film Group), which modeled itself in part on Italian neo-realism and attempted to open the eyes of audience members to concealed social realities, with little or no sugarcoating, often with non-professional actors. Among Solanas’s favorite films were Federico Fellini’s *La Strada* (1954) and Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). In a Spanish-language interview, Solanas described his artistic evolution: “I adored [Luchino] Visconti, I adored Fellini...I adored Orson Welles...and [Ingmar] Bergman.”

Grupo Cine Liberación and groups like it were intensely persecuted by the Argentine authorities, including the Aramburu regime (1955–1958) and the Onganía and Lanusse dictatorships (1966–1973). Solanas and many other of the organization’s members were repeatedly forced into exile. The films themselves were completed in Europe. A notable example of *Grupo Cine Liberación*, Gerardo Vallejo’s *Viejo Reales’ Long Journey to Death* (*El camino hacia la muerte del Viejo Reales*, 1968), about the exploitation of sugar workers in Argentina’s northwest, was completed in Rome—from a negative that had been rescued at great risk—and subsequently banned in Argentina.

The dangers were very real, members of *Cine Liberación* and other

left-wing filmmakers faced the possibility of arrest, torture and assassination by government death squads. Raymundo Gleyzer, who co-founded *Cine de la Base* and made films about labor struggles in Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, was kidnapped in Argentina in 1976 and “disappeared”—i.e., murdered.

Solanas left Argentina the same year following threats from the fascist death squads known as the Triple A (Argentine Anticomunist Alliance) and after escaping a kidnapping attempt by agents of the military dictatorship.

His first major film, *The Hour of the Furnaces* (*La hora de los hornos*, 1968), a documentary in three parts (1. Neocolonialism, 2. Act for liberation, 3. Violence and liberation), expressed both his genuine sympathy for the oppressed and the bankruptcy of his politics.

The film’s political conclusion was an embrace of both Peronism and the cult of Che Guevara, the Argentine-born guerrilla leader murdered by the CIA a year earlier in Bolivia. This was at a time when petty-bourgeois guerrillaism was being promoted by broad layers of left nationalists in Latin America, as well as by the Pabloite revisionist tendency that broke with the Fourth International. It diverted an entire generation of young people in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America from the struggle to build a revolutionary leadership in the working class and into suicidal, unequal combat with the military. This helped pave the way for the rise of US-backed dictatorships across the continent and the deaths of tens of thousands of workers and youth.

The Hour of the Furnaces was filmed clandestinely, defying the censorship imposed by the Onganía military regime. Its first part, focusing on socio-economic inequality in Latin America, features closely cropped images and statements by workers, peasants and indigenous people and establishes an emotional connection with the audience.

The film was first shown to great acclaim at the Pesaro film festival (in Italy) in June 1968—spectators carried Solanas and co-director Octavio Getino on their shoulders. It was shown a year later at the Cannes Festival in May 1969 (in 1968, the festival was closed down as part of the May-June strikes and protests in France). In Argentina, *The Hour of the Furnaces* circulated clandestinely until 1974. It is available on YouTube.

Salinas was never a Marxist. He viewed Marxism as another “foreign import,” together with “neo-liberalism,” supposedly alien to the Argentine reality. His and FORJAS’s critique of neo-colonialism had much in common with that of other left bourgeois-nationalist movements in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, none of which succeeded in breaking the domination of imperialism or realizing the fundamental tasks of democracy and national

development.

The Hour of the Furnaces was released less than a year before the *Cordobazo*—the rebellion of workers in the industrial city of Córdoba—a massive movement of the working class that led to the end of the Onganía/Lanusse dictatorship.

The release of *The Hour of the Furnaces* attracted Peron's attention. The aging ruler, in exile in Franco's Spain, invited *Grupo Cine Liberación* members to his home in Madrid for the production of two films (both released in 1971): *The Justicialist Revolution* (*La Revolución justicialista*) and *Perón: Political and Doctrinal Update for the Seizure of Power* (*Actualización política y doctrinaria para la toma del poder*). Both films provided a platform for the ex-president with which to target Argentina's youth in particular, in preparation for Perón's return from exile.

The two films give free rein to Perón's demagogic and anti-communist social-justice message (*justicialismo*) propaganda. *Actualización*, in particular, consists of a filthy, self-serving and dishonest discourse. The old dictator faces the camera from behind a desk, seated on a throne-like chair. He glorifies his role as the *conductor* (roughly the equivalent of *il Duce* or *führer*), and, echoing Spain's Gen. Francisco Franco, describes Latin American history as a struggle between Hispanic values and Anglo-Saxon colonialism. In these films, Perón speaks highly of the Peronist youth movement, including its armed wing.

Beginning in 1970, a Peronist guerrilla group had been created in Argentina, the Montoneros, one of the Peronist youth groups that made up the Peronist Revolutionary Tendency (Tendencia Revolucionaria del Peronismo), which included high school and university student groups, young workers and peasant youth. The Madrid videos were distributed among them and helped pave the way for Perón's return in October 1973 and his second presidency.

The Montoneros called for Peron's return and the establishment of *socialismo nacional* (nationalist socialism) through the efforts of urban guerrillas. This ended as a tragic disaster resulting in the deaths of thousands of youth under both the Peronist governments (1972–1976—Perón died in 1974) and the military dictatorship that followed it (1976–1983).

In 1975, Solanas released *The Sons of Fierro* (*Los hijos de fierro*), based on his own script, an allegory about the Montoneros and the Peronist youth, which ends with Fierro's (i.e., Perón's) return. The release of this fiction movie, at the time of intense persecution of the Montoneros and the Peronist youth, demonstrates Solanas's personal courage. It was suppressed by the Peronist regime and would not be shown in Argentina until 1984.

("Fierro" is a reference to Martín Fierro, the main character in an epic poem by José Hernández, published in two parts in the 1870s, about a mythical *gaucho* [cowboy], which is widely read in Argentina.)

Decades later, Solanas chronicled the collapse of the Argentine economy in 2001 and its aftermath in two documentaries: *A Social Genocide* (*Memoria del saqueo*—literally, memory of the plunder—in Spanish, 2004) and *The Dignity of the Nobodies* (*La dignidad de los nadies*, 2005). The films denounced the policies of right-wing Peronist President Carlos Menem's administration, including privatizations that benefited global finance capital and the Argentine bourgeoisie and the destruction of social programs.

Solanas's ability to expose the plight of those oppressed by capitalism is especially evident in *The Dignity of the Nobodies*. The two-hour documentary includes interviews with members of the most

exploited sectors of the Argentine population. The latter describe the effects of the economic collapse in 2001, the attacks on education and health care, the struggle by small farmers to prevent the repossession of their farms by the banks, the caravans of the unemployed and the brutal acts of repression that led to increasing popular resistance.

In all, Solanas produced 14 documentary films and seven fiction movies.

His identification with Peronism did not prevent him from denouncing the right-wing Peronist Menem in 1989 for betraying his election promises and privatizing public companies, including Argentina's nationally owned oil company, YPF. For this, the filmmaker was assaulted and shot six times by Menem's thugs in 1991.

Solanas wrote *El Legado* (*The Legacy*), about Perón's political legacy. It was released in 2016 at an event hosted by the General Confederation of Workers (CGT), the source of countless betrayals of the Argentine working class and organizer of anti-communist death squads in the 1970s. Solanas's stated purpose in writing this book was to "rescue [Perón's] strategic emancipation project."

Solanas continued to insist that Perón's was the last attempt to "cut the neo-colonial spider web," but that his legacy had been betrayed. "Once Perón and his project disappeared, Argentina suffered a strategic tragedy. The nation became like a rudderless ship carrying out foreign projects."

That the then-80-year-old Solanas traced the failure of Argentina's "strategic emancipation project" to the death of its *conductor* more than four decades earlier expressed a failure to draw any fundamental lessons from Argentina's difficult history. Peronism, like all of the old bourgeois-nationalist movements, long ago jettisoned "emancipation projects" based upon economic nationalism, import substitution and development of national industries. All of them have subordinated themselves to globally mobile capital, while suppressing the masses of workers and oppressed they claimed to represent.

As a director, Solanas had a capacity to accurately and humanely portray in film the horrifying conditions and heroic struggles of Argentina's workers and youth. His personal courage and creativity were undeniable. These qualities alone, however, could not substitute for a genuinely revolutionary perspective.



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